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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1960 Vol. 7, No. 3

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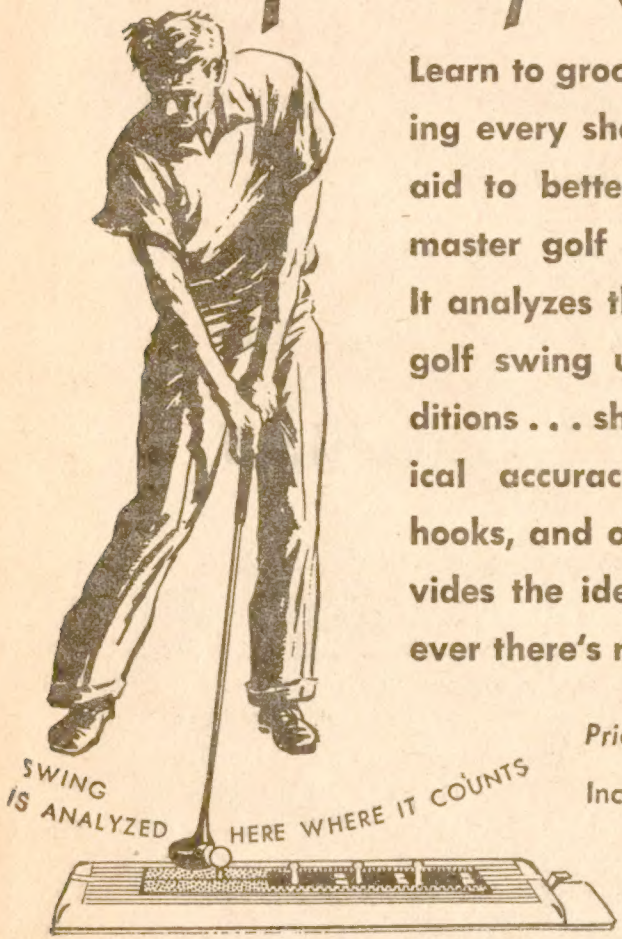

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BLOOD of an ORANGE

It was hard for Mike to believe that an orange grove in the bright Florida sunlight could be haunted by the dark specters of arson and murder. But the nightmare was real.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MICHAEL SHAYNE said, turning the key to start the motor of the car, "How about us doing something exciting and different tonight, Lucy?"

"I'd like it." She stretched to one side, took a quick glance at herself in the rear-view mirror and pushed a brown lock of hair into place with feminine efficiency. "But it wouldn't be different. Excitement gravitates toward you naturally."

"Hmmm," Mike said. He flicked the automatic transmission into place, settling back into the effortless ease which made the car seem only an extension of his own rangy body. The motor purred and the car glided swiftly out from the curb.

It was five o'clock on Friday afternoon, the end of a good week, and the beginning of what promised to be an even better weekend. What more could a man ask than the companionship of his pretty secretary, a pleasant daylight drive, dinner whenever and wherever the mood took them and finally the dark ride home? Then a drink in Lucy's apartment, a lei-

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A COMPLETE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

surely hour seated in the deep chair, and home to bed!

"I wasn't trying to flatter you," Lucy said. "It just seems that wherever you are, things happen, off-trail or otherwise."

"An occupational benefit," Shayne said, drawing her across the seat with his right arm so that her shoulder nestled into his arm pit. The perfume of her hair wafted up to his nostrils as the breeze from the open window caught it.

He stopped for a traffic light, dropped a quick kiss on her hair and removed his arm. She remained leaning against him. Turning right on Northwest Fifth he headed out of town. Traffic was heavy at this hour with offices closing and concessions changing shifts, but as they neared the city limits it thinned out.

The sun was still high on the horizon, though much of its heat was gone. By nightfall the air would have cooled appreciably. A powder-blue sweater lay across Lucy's lap, the same color as her short-sleeved linen dress. After sunset she would need it.

"How about going to the Seminole Village?" Lucy asked. "You're headed that way anyway."

"That tourist place? Why?"

"I want a blanket," she said. "I'm redecorating my apartment."

"In Indian Renaissance?"

"Of course not. In French Provincial. But a blanket would fit. You don't have to stick to the same period any more. The trend is toward mixing periods but getting things with the same 'feel.' A hand-woven blanket would go perfectly in the room. Besides, I need something to cover that old daybed, which isn't any period at all."

They were soon on the outskirts of Miami and the sun was sinking rapidly. Higher up the sky was lavender and pink streaked, like a baby's quilt. Turning northwest toward the Everglades, Shayne followed the Miami Canal into Hendry County.

"Dinner first or afterwards?"

"Afterwards," she said, still leaning against him, her eyes fixed dreamily ahead with that absent look a woman gets when she is in the throes of redecorating or is trying to decide what to wear. "Let's get the blanket bought first."

At the gate to the Reservation the redhead stopped, paid the entrance fee to the attendant and drove into the parking lot. There were only a few cars there but, to Shayne's amazement, one was a police car that belonged to his friend Will Gentry, Chief of Miami's Police Department.

"Lucy, my love, you've mastered the art of pleasing a man to perfection. I ask for excitement and you hand it to me on an Indian blanket instead of a silver platter. But why complain? It isn't the tray that counts. It's the gift."

"Mercenary," Lucy sniffed. "I

suppose you mean because of the police cars. Before you get too carried away, let me remind you that maybe they came to buy blankets too."

"Not on policemen's salaries." Shayne got out of the car and walked around it. "This place is baited for tourists. When people are out on the toot of a lifetime they don't care what they pay or what they get as long as it brings back nostalgic memories of the lush days they spent in Florida. That's why I can't understand why you don't buy your blanket at a department store. At least it would be moth-proof."

"I like hand-made things," Lucy said. "Michael, is it true the Seminoles never signed a peace treaty with the United States?"

"It was, until a few years ago. But their holding out was only a gesture."

They walked arm in arm down a palm-lined path, past the enclosure where every half hour (if there were enough spectators) an Indian wrestled with a crocodile. Beyond the crocodile exhibit there stretched a row of open-thatched houses, in each of which a few Indian women sat, withdrawn and silent, weaving, cooking or making pottery.

At the end of the path Will Gentry was standing with his back turned, talking to a tall man in a business suit. Though the man's face had the rigid lack of expression of the Indian and his hair was long and straight, it was dirty blond in color and his features were unmistakably Anglo-Saxon. His eyes were blue, his nose long but uptilted and bent slightly to one side. One lock of hair fell untidily to his eyebrow. At intervals, he tossed his head back in an effort to get the rebellious lock into place.

"I'm sure you'll want to talk to Will," Lucy said. "I'll wait for you in the gift shop. You can help me select a blanket later."

Shayne nodded. Lighting a cigarette, he stood a short distance off, looking at the stolid, somewhat heavyset figure of his friend, waiting for him to finish his conversation. Finally, Gentry's companion became aware of Shayne and said something to the police chief.

Gentry turned abruptly in the middle of a sentence. His face brightened as he recognized the redhead. He walked over, the man with him following. "This is Bill Thompson, Mike," he said. "Calls himself Osceola, after the old Indian leader. Bill, this is Mike Shayne."

"He was my great great grandfather," Osceola explained quietly. His voice had a firm, reasonable, non-belligerent quality. "I've a right to the name."

"But not a right to start trouble," Gentry said. "No more than your great great grandfather had."

Osceola straightened. "He defended the rights of his people."

Despite the untidy lock of hair, Osceola was a figure of dignity. "Chief Gentry," he said, still in his quiet voice, "it is true that I am part Indian, but I am also an American. As an Indian I am trying to help my people. As an American, I am law-abiding."

The blue eyes flashed. "My people are tired of degradation, of semi-starvation, of exhibiting themselves like circus freaks and of having the white man take most of the profits from this shabby tourist attraction." He threw his head back again, in a gesture disdainful of the Reservation. "Also, they are tired of being squeezed off the land. The two orange groves which border on this village are on ground which is rightfully theirs.

"I know of you, Mr. Shayne," Osceola continued. "I know that you are outraged by injustice, and have helped many of the victims of injustice. Therefore you will understand why it is that I try to help my people."

He bowed, turned on his heel and left, not with the erect, soft padding of an Indian, but with a more measured, and free-swinging stride.

"He's probably a good man," Gentry said. "I don't think he had anything to do with what I came about."

"Just why are you here?" Shayne asked. "Lucy thinks it was to buy blankets."

"There was a fire the other night, in Emil Radstok's orange grove," Gentry said. "It's one of the groves the Seminoles claim. You heard what Bill Thompson just said."

"Does Radstok think the Indians set it?" Shayne asked.

Gentry shook his head. "He thinks my wife's cousin, Alan Whitcomb, did. Alan owns the other grove the Seminoles say is theirs. It's next to Radstok's. You see, Radstok owns a peninsula of about six acres, which runs into Alan's grove. It's pretty inconvenient. Alan has to circle it to take care of his trees. He's been trying to buy it for years, but Radstok won't sell. He doesn't have to. He seems to be making money. Alan isn't, curiously enough. Don't know why. Their groves are about the same size and their oranges are of the same quality. That, incidentally, is the part of the grove which was burned."

Gentry's brow furrowed. "I wish you would help me, Mike. Will you talk to Radstok and try to convince him Alan didn't set the fire? He won't talk to me because of my relationship to Alan. It's a dangerous situation right now. Radstok has a quick temper and serious trouble could be just around the corner."

"Be glad to, Will," Shayne said. "Where can I find him?"

"His grove is right outside the Reservation. Just follow the road. The house is on this side. Mean-

while, I'll see if I can find out anything about the fire from the Indians. I haven't had much success so far."

When Shayne entered the gift shop, Lucy was waiting. "I think I've found what I want," she said. "Just take a look at it, will you?"

"It's exactly right." He smiled, attracted, despite himself, by the bright greens, reds and yellows. "Just the thing for an Indian Provincial Miami apartment."

"Scoffer!" Lucy handed him a bundle, crudely wrapped in brown paper. "I'd already bought and paid for it. The one I showed you was a duplicate. I knew you'd like it, and even if you hadn't I knew I'd take it."

"I'm afraid dinner will be postphoned a bit, angel," Shayne said. He put his arm around her and walked past the Village green, down the path to the car. 'I'm going on an errand for Will Gentry."

"An errand! Is *that* part of the excitement we were hoping for? If it is—I bet you feel let down."

"A little. But I've always got you left."

"Don't be too sure. I may decide to simply vanish. Oh, well," she sighed, "I guess I won't. I'll leave the blanket in the car and look around the village until you get back."

When Shayne emerged from the path through the Reservation, he came on Radstok's house. It was a two story grey frame dwelling which blended into the twilight. Behind it orange trees stretched into the distance, row on row, heavily laden with fruit. To the west, however, the trees were charred, the leaves curled and the fruit shriveled by the desolate and useless destruction.

After a moment, Shayne mounted the front steps and raised the knocker. A moment after it clattered into place the door was opened by a slim girl wearing the straight, fringed leather dress of an Indian.

Her hair knotted at the nape of her neck was sleek and black and her skin was golden. She was delicately boned, built more like a protected city girl than one who had spent her childhood outdoors in the somewhat crude civilization of an Indian Village.

Her luminous black eyes rested on him. "Yes?" she said inquiringly, in a low and cultured voice. "I'm Mrs. Radstok."

"I'm Michael Shayne," the redhead said. "I'd like to speak to your husband, if I may."

"He's having dinner, but— Well, come in." She opened the door wide.

In the dining room a mammoth man sat at the table before a dish piled high with food. He was wearing an olive drab shirt and work pants. His hair, unruly and black, was so long it curled at the collar line.

Without looking up, he asked in

a voice with a heavy accent, "Who it is, Moon?"

"Mr. Michael Shayne." She sat down at her place, motioning Shayne to the chair beside her.

"Will Gentry sent me," Shayne said, without preamble. "He thought you might talk with me, since you're reluctant to discuss the burning of your orange grove with him."

Radstok dropped his knife and fork, placed both hands on the table and with lips tightening he stared at the detective out of black and bloodless eyes. "Please, Mr. Shayne, believe me I have nothing to say to you—nothing! I'm too tired and sick at heart to discuss anything with anybody right now. Just leave me alone now. Maybe later—perhaps tomorrow!"

Shayne got up, smiled down at Radstok, and said: "I understand, Mr. Radstock. I'll come back tomorrow."

Mrs. Radstok led the redhead toward the door, opened it, and walked outside with him. "I m sorry, Mr. Shayne. He was rude," she said. "He has been half crazy since the fire. What was it you were going to talk to him about?"

"I just wanted to tell him that I, too, don't believe Alan Whitcomb burned his orange grove."

"How do *you* know?" She faced him erectly, chin lifted, her straight delicate features dark with sudden anger, her breathing agitated.

"Will Gentry is quite sure that Whitcomb is innocent. But you better not put it as bluntly as that to your husband. He seems to be allergic to Gentry's name."

"I won't mention Gentry, don't worry. And I won't tell him about Whitcomb either. Because I think Whitcomb set the fire deliberately. He couldn't buy the orchard, so he burned it!"

"I admire your loyalty."

"My people didn't do it," she said, "if that's what you're intimating. They have lost the spirit to fight, as you can see for yourself if you will visit that tourist trap down the road they call a Village."

"I have visited it. I met Osceola too. He claims to be a man of peace."

"All Indians are now," she said sadly. "Rebellion is not the answer. And yet—how can we sit quietly and watch." She stopped abruptly, sighed and moved toward the door to enter the house.

Shayne followed, admiring the grace of her slim body in the short leather dress. Taking her extended hand, he held it for a moment longer than necessary. It was cool and soft.

He smiled down at her, opened the door for her to enter.

II

SHAYNE HAD BEEN asleep only a few minutes when the telephone on the table next to his bed started ringing. After leaving the Semi-

nole Village, he and Lucy had eaten a leisurely dinner at her apartment, and listened to some relaxing music. Then he had returned home.

He switched on the light over his bed, blinking against it as the telephone jangled again. It was only eleven, he noted as he put the receiver to his ear and raised himself to one elbow.

"Shayne speaking," he said, stifling a yawn.

The answering voice was importunate and clear, yet beneath its firmness lay a tremor. "This is Moon Radstok. I must see you!"

Despite his quickening interest, he was reluctant to let go of sleep. "Not tonight, please," he started to protest. "I've already—"

"Yes, tonight," she interrupted. "My husband has been murdered. I just found him. An arrow—" Her voice broke on a sob.

He waited, letting the incredible words assume reality.

"Do you think I should call the police?" Moon Radstok's voice rose, almost out of control now.

"Of course. Call them immediately. I'll be right over."

"Yes, hurry. I'm at home."

Shayne replaced the telephone in the cradle and it took him exactly eleven minutes to dress. In six he was out in the car, headed toward the Seminole Reservation for the second time that night.

The night was clear. The moon had just risen and loomed large and orange on the horizon. The stars around it cast an almost daylight glow over the canal.

A strange combination—the Indian maid and the Hungarian farmer. Obviously, Moon was educated. Perhaps Radstok had been too. Yet their backgrounds, their family traditions, their mores, must have been as far apart as the poles. Possibly it had been mutual interests, perhaps an attraction of intellect, on which their relationship had been founded. Or it may have been only that Emil was a man and Moon a girl, for when male and female are drawn together even a common language is not important.

When Shayne reached the Reservation he bypassed the entrance gate and took the public road around to Radstok's house. The porch light was on and as he drew to a stop he saw Moon's figure silhouetted in the front window, as if she had been watching for him. Before he could get out of the car, she was outside.

She was still wearing the leather-fringed dress. Her hair was still slick as patent leather, the low knot unwisped and neat. However, even by moonlight, he could see the dark circles beneath her eyes and the change in her skin color. In the short time since he had seen her, shock had pared her down. While she had looked delicate before, she was fragile now.

She moved quickly, as if her

nervousness must find outlet, opened the car door and got in.

"You will find when you go over there—" her voice was strained—"that they are very angry. I can't go. I couldn't bear to see *him* again. Acamo shouldn't have taken me there at all." She paused, adding with a shiver of horror, "Emil was scalped!"

"I'm going to the Reservation, of course," the redhead said. "But first—why did you call me?"

"Because I want you to work for me, not the police. I want you to prove that Alan Whitcomb burned the grove and murdered my husband. We were out the night of the fire and Whitcomb knew it. The police will never prove anything because Whitcomb is the cousin of Gentry's wife."

"Will Gentry is one of my best friends," Shayne said. "He is a dedicated man. If his brother were guilty of murder, I know that he would arrest him. If he's convinced Whitcomb's guilty, he'll bring him in for trial. However, in this case, there seems to be plenty of other possibilities—a whole tribe of them, in fact."

"My people did not do it," she said angrily.

It seemed strange to Shayne that, far removed as she was from the open-thatched houses and the dirt, by education and by her marriage, she still identified herself with the Indians.

"They must have objected when you married Radstok," Shayne said "And they resented the fact that your husband's grove was on land they believed theirs. They had plenty of reason to seek revenge."

"But they did not do it," she repeated stubbornly. "They asked me to return to the tribe and I refused. They accepted my refusal. Whoever killed Emil was someone who hated Emil himself. That could only be Whitcomb."

"But how could Whitcomb benefit? In the first place, the trees are now practically useless in the burned part. Just as important, with Emil dead you inherit the grove and there is no guarantee that you will sell him the disputed acreage any more than Emil would. Do you think a man commits murder out of sheer pique?"

She nodded. "That, and hurt pride. You see, Emil once paid attention to Whitcomb's sister Amelia. She is a school teacher. As it was with Acamo and me, their marriage was taken for granted. The groves adjoined, and Amelia would have inherited Whitcomb's.

"But then Emil met me and we married. I think Emil has always felt guilty about Amelia. That's why, in the end, he decided to sell Whitcomb the peninsula of trees he wanted. He had it surveyed and the deed was signed, but he didn't tell Whitcomb. If only he had! The grove wouldn't have been burned and he'd be alive today!" She stopped as if embarrassed by the

lament, as if it were out of keeping with Indian stoicism.

"Who is Acamo?" Shayne asked.

"Our totems were right," she said. "We grew up together, attended the same University and I was to marry him. It was written in the stars, they said. But when I met Emil I knew it was his name with mine in the stars. I knew he was gentle and kind and that he needed love. But no one could see it but me. Acamo is bitter. He has never married."

Shayne ran fingers through his coarse red hair, then reached into his pocket for a cigarette. When Moon refused the offered pack, he lit his own and dropped the match into the ashtray. "What about the man who calls himself Osceola? Did he resent your marriage too?"

"No. He is only half Indian, but he wouldn't have, anyway. He is good. He was a friend of Emil's. They spent much time together."

Strange, how the intonation of the Indian crept into her speech at times. The education and culture were still there, but the arrangement of the words had an old-world archaic flavor.

"Osceola owns a small syrup factory called *The Pancake's Friend*. It's not far from here, near Pompano, on the coast. Emil was interested in the venture, not financially, but merely because it was a one-man business which was paying off. I can't figure why. I didn't think too much of the syrup.

"At any rate, the only thing Emil and Osceola disagreed on was Emil's right to the orange grove. Osceola believed, with the Seminoles, that it was on Seminole land. But even then, Osceola blamed the Government, not Emil, for Emil had paid for the land and it was beyond reason to expect him to turn it over gratis to the Seminoles. Osceola, with his idealism, would have, of course, but Emil wasn't half Indian."

Shayne massaged his left earlobe gently between thumb and forefinger. "What happened tonight, Moon? Start at the beginning."

"After dinner," she said, "Emil went out to walk through the burned part of the grove. He often did that. He'd stand and put his hand on the charred trunks as if he were trying to feel some evidence of life in the trees, or he'd stroke them, the way you'd pat a dog. That whole section was ruined, but it seemed as if he refused to believe it.

"Tonight he stayed out longer than usual. I thought perhaps he had gone over to the factory with Osceola. He often did that too in the evening. I was just about to go to bed and not wait up any longer when Acamo arrived. He was frightened, though he tried to hide it. But he wasn't sorry about Emil, only angry at the incrimination of the Village."

"He took you over?"

She nodded, the large gold hoops of her earrings swinging against her neck. "He shouldn't have." She shuddered. "It was horrible." There was a long pause. "I believe when he knew Emil was dead he transferred all the hatred to me. Or perhaps he always hated me, since I married Emil. I demeaned his manhood in the eyes of the tribe."

"All right, Moon," Shayne said. "You'd better go in now. The police will be along soon to question you."

"The police!" she said harshly. "I wan't nothing to do with Gentry. I'm hiring you to prove Alan Whitcomb guilty. I'll pay you whatever you ask."

"We'll get to that later," he said.

She looked at him in silence, her eyes luminous even in the dim light, then opened the car door and got out. He waited until she had closed the front door before he swung around and started for the Indian Village.

The green was milling with policemen when he arrived. Not an Indian was visible except one old Senatorial-looking chief standing beside Osceola and a tall, bronzed man in dungarees and a tee shirt talking to Will Gentry. The young Indian's hair was straight and long and he wore tiny gold hoops in his pierced ears. Tattooed on one arm was a setting sun, on the other arm a moon. The tattoos were old. They must have been done in early childhood when the stars predicted the marriage of Moon and Acamo.

The open thatched houses stood empty, yet out in the wooded darkness one sensed rather than heard or saw the presence of people. There was no sound of movement or voices, and no leaves stirred. Yet there it was—that silent presence, the watching eyes, the waiting bodies, the almost tangible breath of fear and hostility.

Circling the policemen, Shayne walked to the center of the green. Tied to a stake, his arms behind his back, was the body of Emil Radstok, clad only in work pants. The knees were slightly bent, and the chin rested on a bare chest crisscrossed with cuts, revealing, inescapably, the bloody head from which a circle of scalp had been removed. From the left side of the back a bright-feathered arrow protruded.

Shayne turned away, sickened by the barbaric sight and unable, for a moment, to examine the body more closely. What an ordeal it must have been for Moon to look on the body of her husband thus broken and desecrated. By subjecting her to it, Acamo had showed the intensity of his smouldering resentment and sense of outrage.

Leaving the young Indian Will Gentry walked over, standing silently by while Shayne looked again at the body. There was nothing to be learned from it except the viciousness of the man who

had debased it. Half to himself, Shayne said, "A clean shot isn't so bad . . ."

"It's difficult for us to accept primitive barbarism," Gentry said. "Osceola swears he knew nothing of this plan."

"Plan? Are you saying that this was a premeditated tribal slaying?"

"It certainly has the look of a tribal murder." Gentry's square forehead wrinkled as he rubbed his jaw.

"Or it was made to look that way," Shayne said.

"All right. What's your theory?"

"Not mine. Moon Radstok's. She is sure Whitcomb did it."

"Ridiculous!" Gentry bridled. "A civilized man doesn't kill this way."

"He does if he's trying to frame an Indian tribe."

"Now look here," Gentry sputtered, "if I had any suspicion—even a *slight* one—that Alan murdered Emil Radstok I'd be over there right now putting handcuffs on him. But I know him. He's incapable of seriously harming anyone."

"Human nature being what it is, that's an extraordinary statement for a police officer to make," Shayne said. He turned, and walked in the direction of a young Indian who was standing grimly silent and alone a few yards from the slain man. He was more profoundly shaken than he would have cared to admit even to himself.

III

ACAMO WATCHED Shayne approach. Unmoving, expressionless, and with folded arms, in the traditional stance of the Indian. His eyes were hard, his jaw outthrust.

Then suddenly, as if abandoning the pose of an Indian, he spoke. "You have seen Moon." It was a statement, not a question. A glint of hatred flashed within his eyes, then faded.

Shayne nodded. "She asked me to come."

"Moon has returned to the tribe," Acamo said.

"You mean, now that her husband is dead, she will return."

"No. She had returned before, spiritually. Now she will return in body. Why else did her husband die?" Acamo's attempt to make the statement sound cryptic rather amused Shayne. The implication was obvious.

"She was more loyal to you," Shayne said. "She swore that neither you, nor any member of the Village, killed him."

"She spoke truly."

"She also told me she had refused to return to the tribe. Your efforts to make it look as if she killed her husband so she could return makes you a suspect. I hope you realize that."

Acamo remained motionless, his lips tight, his sullen eyes riveted on the detective. A few feet away the eyes of an older Indian, glow-

ing with resentment were fastened on Shayne too. From back in the bushes, he could feel other eyes trained on him, all harboring a vague but unmistakable enmity, as if his prying was an affront to tribal dignity.

It was a strange experience, this mass anger directed at an outsider. He was not seriously disturbed, yet he felt the need of justifying himself. With that end in view, he swung around and walked across the green to his car.

Outside the Seminole Village, he turned left on the State road, bypassed Radstok's house, in which all the lights were ablaze, and continued to the next lead-off. As he passed he wondered if Moon, despite her protestations of love for her husband could be in any way connected with his death. Loyalty to race is sometimes strong, and hers might have increased under the pressure put on her by the members of her tribe. She lived close; they could see her often. Even the strongest rock disintegrates under drop by drop erosion.

The road to Alan Whitcomb's house was about the same length as the one to Radstok's, but it was bumpy and corroded. The house too was neglected. Efforts had been made to prop up a sagging porch and one rail in the bannister was new. It appeared to be the house of a man badly in need of money.

Only one light showed from the front, a down-focused bulb in a reading lamp. Noting that the doorbell ahd fallen from its socket Shayne raised his hand to knock. But either Whitcomb had heard his car stop or had anticipated his coming, for the door was opened before his hand reached it.

Whitcomb was a slim, sandy-haired man of average height. He switched on the porch light, smiling broadly as he met the detective's steady gaze.

"Mr. Shayne! What a pleasure. I've heard about you from Will Gentry." He thrust his hand out cordially.

The living room was that of an educated man of discriminating taste. Bookshelves stretched from floor to ceiling, the chairs were deep and made for long hours of reading, and the paintings were excellent replicas of old masters with, here and there, an avant garde original.

A tall, raw-boned woman entered from the kitchen. She seemed to be all one color—a pale tan even to her eyes, which gave her a bewilderingly blank and sightless look.

"My sister, Amelia," Whitcomb said. "Amelia, Mr. Michael Shayne."

She dried her hands on her apron. "I'm just finishing the dishes. I had some papers to correct tonight and I got them over with first. Please sit down, Mr. Shayne."

The redhead took a deep chair, stretching his long legs out comfortably before him. Whitcomb sat on the sagging davenport beside his sister. "I suppose you've come about the fire at Radstok's. It's a rather embarrassing situation for me, and for Mr. Gentry too. I can understand why he'd want some one else to look into it. Radstok is convinced that I set it."

Shayne noted the present tense. "Didn't you know Radstok was dead?"

Amelia gasped, the sightless-looking eyes widening in shocked disbelief. "Dead," she breathed. "Emil is dead. Oh, my God—"

To cover his sister's shock, Whitcomb said. "It must have been his heart. He was over-weight and too quick tempered."

"He was murdered," Shayne said. "Possibly by the Seminoles. He was found tied to a stake on the green with an arrow through his heart. He had been tortured."

Amelia was breathing harshly. Her lips were very white.

"Alan," she said, in a completely different tone of voice, "I think we'd better sell the grove, or give it to the Indians and leave."

"I said it's possible he was killed by the Seminoles." Shayne ran fingers through his hair, lit a cigarette and dropped the match in an ashtray on the table beside him. "But to me that seems unlikely—very hard to believe."

As if Shayne had not spoken, Amelia continued, "The next one they'll go after will be Alan. They want our land." Her long, work-worn fingers tapped nervously at the hollow of her neck. "Alan, we must get out! I've never been happy here!"

Whitcomb stared in tight-lipped consternation first at her and then at Shayne. "I think I'd better show you this," he said, rising and walking to a cluttered desk. "It came in the mail in a plain typewritten envelope, two days after the fire at Radstok's."

It was a legal document, a deed to the burned peninsula of orange trees which Radstok owned. It was made out to Alan Whitcomb, signed by Radstok and witnessed by a Notary Public in Miami.

"Yes, Moon told me that Radstok had decided to sell you that part of the grove," Shayne said. He nodded grimly and handed the paper back.

"What a grisly joke, if Radstok mailed this *after* the trees were ruined," Whitcomb said. "But I don't believe he sent it."

"Then who did?" Amelia demanded harshly. "Could it have been his wife?"

"Do you know her well?" Shayne asked, not unaware that the question was loaded.

"Hardly at all." Her voice was harsh, disdainful. "We had nothing in common, naturally." Amelia drew her body straight, the square

shoulders giving her an aspect of defiance.

"But you knew Emil Radstok before she married Moon."

"Slightly. He was a coarse, brutal man. I suppose that was why he was able to marry an Indian."

"Moon was a university graduate."

"Learning can't change a person. It was just a veneer—" Amelia's voice trailed off, but her eyes continued to glow with bitter hatred.

Shayne looked at her thoughtfully, still tugging his left earlobe. The anger in her eyes seemed to verge on torment. It suggested that her feeling for Emil Radstok before Moon had come on the scene had been equally balanced between attraction and revulsion.

"Will you have a drink?" Whitcomb asked. "I've some old brandy."

"Thanks," Shayne said. "I believe I will."

"I'll join you," Amelia said. "Alan can't drink. His doctor has forbidden it."

She left for the kitchen and in less than a minute returned, carrying two tumblers filled to the brim with brandy and ice. Without waiting for Shayne, she took a deep swallow from her glass, setting it down with an audible sigh. The harshness and tension seemed to leave her, and she smiled for the first time. With hardly a moment's pause, she lifted the glass again and drained it. Whitcomb looked disturbed.

Shayne thought he knew why. For Emil Radstok she had substituted drink, and Whitcomb, involved as he was with his books and his orange grove had probably only just begun to realize that his sister was an alcoholic.

IV

AFTER LEAVING Whitcomb's Shayne drove slowly down the dark road, unhappily reminding himself that the problem of who had killed Radstok was no nearer a solution than it had been an hour ago, when Moon had roused him out of bed.

His recollection of his last conversation with Moon brought to mind the queer name, *The Pancake's Friend,* the syrup Osceola manufactured when he was not occupied with his legal struggle on behalf of the Indians. On impulse, Shayne crossed the Miami Canal and headed the car toward Pompano, stopping at a small roadside stand on the far side of New River Canal to look up the address of the factory. It was located on a road only a few miles from the canal.

Skimming along the untraveled highway, in the moonlight, he let the facts simmer in his mind. Finding Radstok's body on Indian territory went far to remove suspicion from all the Indians. Yet might not a clever Indian have

used precisely that gambit to avert suspicion from himself and his people? An Indian such as Acamo who had conceivably hated Radstok enough to kill him?

If that reasoning was wide of the mark, the only other logical suspect left was Whitcomb. No, no —there were two others. Amelia and Moon. Was it, after all, Moon? Moon, with her shining hair and brilliant eyes. Had Emil's grossness in the end overweighed his animal attraction? Or had her loyalty to the tribe been so strong that she had been driven to kill?

Of course, Moon's slight body would have been unequal to the task of moving the two hundred pound weight of her husband, and it was ridiculous to conceive of Emil's standing quietly by while she lashed him to a stake on the Village green. If it was Moon, she must have had an accomplice.

Stopping the car before a small, one storey building—dark, except for a dim bulb at the back—he got out. The door was made of planking, one strong beam running diagonally to hold it together, and was fastened with a common padlock. At the side of the building stood a small trailer, the kind used to transport moderately heavy objects, and a gardener's wheelbarrow, its metal parts heavily coated with rust.

Shayne pulled at the padlock. The steel hinges connecting door to jamb were rusty. He sprung the lock with a few well-aimed blows of his fist.

As he swung the door open, a light went on at the back. He noticed that there was a closed door, probably leading outside, on the left. Seated on a mussed cot was an old man, blinking sleepily, his eyes red-rimmed.

"Bill?" the seated man croaked. "What do you want at this unusual hour?"

"I'm a friend of Bill's," Shayne said, moving forward into the room.

"No friends come here. Get out!"

"In a moment," the redhead said. "Aren't there any more lights?" Turning, he walked back toward the front door and found the main light switch beside it.

"Are you the caretaker?" he asked pleasantly.

The man nodded, his eyes sullenly defiant.

The lights on the contents of the one-room factory stood out in stark relief. In the center were two large vats, their sides covered with the dried, sticky scum of boiled sugar. Along one wall stood a long table surmounted by empty bottles on a shelf. At one end of the shelf Shayne counted about fifty full bottles labeled, THE PANCAKE'S FRIEND—*Pure Cane Sugar Syrup*. Along the other wall the light gleamed on eleven one-hundred-pound bags of sugar, marked with the traditional double X.

"Where does Osceola get his sugar?"

"Dunno," the old man muttered. "Venezuela, I guess. Comes in on a banana boat."

"Don't you work here?"

"Naw. Just come in at night to sleep. Don't get here till eleven. Bill don't care. This sugar must of come in today. There was none here last night." The old man was losing some of his hostility.

Osceola . . . nee Bill Thompson. A faint, and annoyingly unidenitfiable bell rang in Shayne's mind. Ignoring it, he murmured, "Queer number for a shipment."

The old man's ears were sensitive as spun glass. "Don't see nothing queer about it," he said. "What he needed, he bought."

"Practical explanation. Mind if I use your 'phone?"

"Okay, if it's local. Don't want Bill charging me up with no long distance calls."

"It's not local, but this will cover it." Shayne took a crumpled five-dollar bill from his pocket, and laid it on the desk.

The old man picked it up and shoved it in his pocket, peering over Shayne's shoulder as he dialed the number of Police Headquarters in Miami. His breath was heavy with tobacco and rot-gut. His expression was still surly.

While he waited for the call to go through, Shayne turned slightly, bringing the eleven bags of sugar into line with his vision. Did he imagine it, or was one bag less full than the rest?

He turned back as Gentry's voice rasped over the wire. "What have you found on the Radstok murder, Will?" the redhead asked.

"Nothing much. I have eight Indians here for questioning but we might as well be talking to dead wood. They don't know anything and they wouldn't talk freely if they did. Judging from their expressions, they all hated Radstok. But they hate Whitcomb too. And Amelia. I'm afraid they don't like you much, either, Mike."

"Where were they when Radstok was being fastened to the stake and tortured?"

"Not around, apparently. Oh, by the way, Radstok wasn't tortured."

"That's hard to believe."

"I know. I was deceived too. But the coroner says the marks were put on his body *after* he was killed."

Shayne ran fingers through his coarse red hair. "That's about what we figured, isn't it? That someone wanted to make it *look* like an Indian murder. Whoever it was probably didn't have a taste for torture and just wanted to get the murder over quickly. Radstok died from the arrow, didn't he?"

"Yes. Just a plain back-stabbing."

"Is Osceola there too?"

"Very much so. He needs a soap

box. He's still ranting and raving about Indian rights—"

"Will, do me a favor." Shayne abandoned his hair and tugged at his left earlobe. "Call Customs Office. Find out how many hundred pound bags of sugar Bill Thompson got off a banana boat from Venezuela today."

"Thompson? What's he got to do with it?"

"He's Osceola, remember? His real name's Bill Thompson." Again that tantalizing bell, that thought just beyond memory . . . "I'll wait here for you to call back," he continued. "Pompano six—eight two one four."

After he hung up, Shayne walked over to the previously-noticed, slightly different-looking bag of sugar leaning against the wall. It was plainly less full than the other bags. But it felt like sugar when he pressed down on it with his fingers. Still . . . Withdrawing a penknife from his pocket, he cut a small slit in the side of the bag.

"Hey, whatcha doing?" The old man was at his back, plucking at his coat.

"Don't worry. That five spot I gave you will cover this too. I just can't resist sugar." The redhead took a pinch through the slit in the bag and popped it into his mouth. It was sugar, all right—most of it.

He bit down hard on a few grits which remained undissolved. His gold filling jumped. He took a bigger pinch, let the sugar dissolve in his mouth and spit what was left into the palm of his hand. It glittered like gold. It *was* gold.

To make certain, he took a large handful and held it under the light. Most of its was sugar, some of it wasn't. Together, it had a faintly yellowish tinge.

So the source of Osceola's affluence was now clear. In this completely illegal shipment he had gotten a one-hundred-pound bag of sugar mixed with gold dust. When he melted the sugar down to make syrup, using the manufacturing plant for a front, the undissolved gold remained. No wonder it was a one-man business. It stood to reason that Bill Thompson wouldn't want to let anyone else in on his smuggling racket.

The profits must have been enormous. The Indians in Venezuela were probably paid, at most, a dollar an ounce to smuggle many times that sum in gold into one bag of sugar. After it was retrieved Osceola might net thirty dollars an ounce. Thirty-five was the United States Treasury rate, but, working through a fence, or an illegitimate jewelry manufacturer, he had probably been compelled to take less.

The 'phone on the desk jangled. Shayne walked over and picked it up. "He got ten bags, Mike," Gentry said. "His usual shipments averaged about that."

"That's what I figured. Do one more thing for me, Will. I know you've got a BRITTANICA there.

Look up *Osceola* and read what it says to me."

"Good Lord! Of all the haywire requests! Why don't you do your studying at home?"

"Too much noise. Do it now, Will!"

"All right." There was the sound of the receiver being set down and then, after a moment, a rustling as Gentry turned the pages of the encyclopedia. Finally, back on the wire, he said, "Here it is. Osceola, Eighteen thirty-four—thirty-eight —a Seminole American Indian leader in the Second Seminole War. When the United States Commissioners negotiated for the removal of the Seminoles to Oklahoma, Osceola declared to the U.S. agent, General Wiley Thompson, that any chief who agreed to emigrate would be killed.

"Late in Eighteen thirty-five, Osceola murdered Charley Emathla, a chief who was preparing to emigrate with his people, and with a few companions shot and killed General Thompson."

"That's all, Will. Thanks." Shayne hung up.

V

IT WAS NOT necessary to return to the Seminole Reservation to get to Miami, so Shayne took the coast road down. On the way, he mulled over the vagaries of human nature, the hatreds which could lie festering for twenty years and, one day, find outlet, rise to the surface and burst into flame. It had to mean, of course, that Bill Thompson, the self-reincarnated Osceola, was an insane fanatic.

He lit a cigarette, flicking the dead match out into the dark. Tonight, opportunity had come to a focal point where financial gain met revenge. Though Shayne himself had happened on the scene inadvertently because of Lucy's desire to buy a blanket, his presence had been taken advantage of.

There was still one big unanswered question bothing the redhead as he drove along the moonlit road. Who had set the fire in Emil Radstok's orange grove? Almost certainly not the murderer, for natural cunning would have kept a psychopathic killer from committing a lesser crime before perpetrating a larger one.

In a way, Whitcomb had profited by the fire when he'd received the deed to the disputed peninsula of trees. Yet, possession of that land was of decreased value now that the trees were destroyed. Was it possible Radstok himself had set the fire and then, maliciously mailed the deed to the useless land to Whitcomb? Could a man get satisfaction from such an act? Could he wallow that deeply in hate?

Some men might, Shayne reflected, dropping his used cigarette into the ashtray. But not the sort of man who went out every night to

stroke the burned tree trunks. Not the kind of man who loved his land that much.

Radstok had to be eliminated. Then who? Not Whitcomb. Both revenge and arson seemed as alien to the man's gentle erudition as murder.

There was one person left. Amelia. She had twice said one thing and felt another. First, when she had spoken sneeringly of Emil's lack of restraint and his brutality. Second, when she had lied about never having been happy living in the grove. Perhaps she hadn't, after Radstok's marriage to Moon. But Shayne suspected that even then she had derived a vicarious pleasure from being near him.

He tugged his left earlobe reflectively, guiding the car expertly along the open road with the other hand. He was overwhelmingly convinced now that Amelia had set fire to the grove, partly out of despair and partly in revenge for Radstok's marriage to Moon.Then, consumed by curiosity, she had gone into the house, perhaps to enter the bedroom where Emil and Moon had slept, to stand for a moment in the silence believing herself the wife. In that capacity, she might have opened drawers in a semi-trance not looking for any particular thing, and inadvertently come upon the deed already made out and signed. Then suddenly, she became Amelia Whitcomb again. She hated Emil and loved Alan, so she took the deed and somewhere, later, typed the envelope and mailed it to her brother. Not realizing, in her disturbed state, that it was for the part of the grove she had already burned and that the land was practically worthless.

Shayne entered the city over the County Causeway, driving south on Miami Avenue until he came to Flagler, where he turned east and stopped in front of the Police Station.

He took the four steps at the entrance in two leaps, passed the policeman at the desk with a nod and knocked at the door of Gentry's office. At the gruff, "Come in," he entered.

Gentry was alone with Osceola. The room still reverberated with the sound of Osceola's voice, though he had stopped talking when the door opened. He rose as the redhead entered. "I'll finish this later, Chief Gentry—"

"Wait!" Shayne said. He turned to Gentry. "Remember what I had you read in the *Encyclopedia,* Will? Before the Second Seminole War Osceola killed General Wiley Thompson. Wiley Thompson! Will Thompson! Bill Thompson!"

Osceola looked from Shayne to Gentry, his brow furrowing. "What is he talking about?"

"I'm talking about revenge," Shayne said. "Revenge for a murder committed over a hundred years ago—and about the murder of

Emil Radstok today. Bill Thompson isn't descended from Osceola," he continued, "but from General Wiley Thompson, the man the original Osceola killed. He isn't an Indian at all, but a white man who hates the Indian. All his talk of protecting them was only a build-up for his ultimate betrayal tonight, when he tried to frame the whole Seminole tribe for the murder of Emil Radstok."

Osceola had stood quietly while Shayne spoke, the unruly lock hanging undisturbed over one eyebrow. Finally he said softly, "It won't hold water, Shayne. No sane man would kill, and take a chance of being convicted of murder, just to incriminate a tribe of Indians."

"He would if he was a dangerous fanatic and if the man he killed knew something about him which might send him to jail," the detective countered. "Such as that he was smuggling gold from Venezuela."

Shayne turned to Gentry. "Osceola got ten bags of sugar legitimately, through Customs. The eleventh probably came in on a small boat. He picked it up on the beach and brought it by wheelbarrow to his factory."

Osceola tensed, like a lion preparing for the kill, but before he could spring Shayne was on him, pinning his arms to his sides, holding him writhing and kicking.

Gentry half rose, then sank back in his chair and pushed a button on his desk. In less than a minute two policemen entered, took the struggling Osceola from Shayne and stood waiting for orders.

"I assume everything you said is true, Mike," Gentry said, after the room had quieted. "Osceola was smuggling gold, Radstok knew about it and threatened to expose him, so Osceola killed Radstok."

"Approximately." Shayne seated himself on a corner of the desk. "Except that I don't think Osceola killed Radstok because he threatened to tell. Radstok was getting a good rake-off from his knowledge of Osceola's illegal activity. That's why he was able to live so much better than Alan Whitcomb, off the same size grove. No, I think Osceola got tired of paying Radstok to keep his mouth shut, saw a chance of getting the Seminoles in trouble to satisfy his quite mad vengeance urge. He knocked off one bird with two stones, as it were. He bought the arrows, stabbed Radstok in the back with one of them, cut a few slits in his skin and scalped him to make it look as if he had been tortured. Then he tied him to the stake on the green."

"That does it," Gentry said. "Take him away, boys."

After the door had closed behind them, Gentry said, "Well, Mike, you've done it again. Congratulations."

"Congratulations to you," Shayne said, "for seeing so quickly that Osceola couldn't possibly have

known Radstok was mutilated after he was dead unless he had done it himself. But there's one thing you didn't suspect and that didn't dawn on me until a short while ago. Osceola referred to himself as a sane man. Actually, he's hopelessly psychotic—as mad as they come. His determination to avenge a century-old killing proves that right up to the hilt."

Mike Shayne sighed. "Unfortunately, the most dangerous criminal lunatic can be completely sane in one narrow aspect of his personality. And Osceola—Bill Thompson—was sane enough in his gold smuggling activities and a smarter, more vicious murderer never narrowly escaped the noose. I feel as badly about it as you do, but I'm afraid he'll never hang."

MIKE SHAYNE PRESENTS

Next Month's Headliners

THE CHRONIC WIDOWER by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Novelet

MURDER FOR MEMBERS ONLY by NORMAN ANTHONY

An Unusual Novelet of Suspense

ONE BIG CRIME by TALMAGE POWELL

UNDERCOVER MAN by T. C. McCLARY

A Startlingly Timely Suspense Novelet

By ROBERT BLOCH

Did the quiz show scandals leave you gasping? If they did—you'll be jolted right out of your chair by this brilliant writer's chilling look at what might have happened!

YOU'LL BE SEEING my name in the newspapers one of these days. What galls me is that when you do you probably won't even recognize it.

But then chances are you couldn't recite a list of the executive vice-presidents of NBC, CBS, ABC or Mutual either. The important thing is that around here, when people hear the name of Willis T. Millaney, they jump. I've always carried a lot of weight in this network, and that's where it counts.

At least it counted as far as most people in the TV industry were concerned. The only one who didn't seem to give a damn was Buzzie Waters.

Yes, Buzzie Waters. *His* name you'll know. Because for the past three years I've worked night and day behind the scenes, building it up. Building up his Hooper and his Nielson ratings, too. That fat ham wouldn't amount to a hill of beans if at wasn't for me. Him and his "Bzzzzzz—Buzzie" tag, and his corny routines out of the Catskills!

Let me tell you something, comics like Buzzie sell on the open market for exactly eight-tenths of one cent, or just a fraction under a dime a dozen. He'd never have gotten off the Borscht Circuit if it

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THE BIG BUILD-UP

hadn't been for me, and everybody knows it.

Everybody but Buzzie, apparently. The trouble started when he forgot.

I was sitting in my office one hot afternoon when the phone rang. It was Sid Richter, calling from the studio where *Buzzin' Around* was going into rehearsal for the first show of the fall season. Sid's the kind of producer who likes to keep all the details wrapped up, so the minute my girl gave me his name I knew that something had gone wrong.

"All right," I said. "Let's have it."

"You really want it?" Sid asked. "This is gonna hurt."

"Don't tell me, let me guess," I answered. "Buzzie doesn't like the script."

"Nope."

"He doesn't like the guest-star format?"

"Try again."

"He showed up drunk."

"Worse than that."

"How much worse?"

I could hear Sid take a deep breath at the other end of the wire. "He didn't show up at all, period."

"Now wait a minute—" I started to say.

"I've been waiting, for over an hour. And so have a cast of fourteen, plus a full crew, all union, and a twenty-piece orchestra."

"What's the story? You tried locating him?"

"There is no story, and I wouldn't bother calling you if I hadn't tried. He knew about this, of course, and he was around last night. Somebody bumped into him at Lindy's."

"Drunk or sober?"

"Half and half. He threw a piece of cheesecake at the waiter."

"Good old Buzzie, always on."

"Well, he's not on today. We've tried every place in town. He left his hotel this morning and nobody's seen him since. His agent doesn't know, his writers don't know—"

I had a hunch. "Did you call his psychiatrist?"

Sid gave me a tired laugh. "Which one? You know how he's been lately. He changes psychiatrists even faster than he changes writers."

"What about this girl-friend of his, this Melody Morgan?"

"Just talked to her. Says he hasn't showed for a week."

"Well." I stalled a moment. "You're shaping up the rest of the show, though, aren't you? Shooting around him?"

"What else can we do? I can't even get hold of his stand-in, that double he hired, what's-his-name."

"Joe Traskin," I told him. "And it doesn't matter, because Buzzie told me last week he was going to fire him."

"Great! We can't even line up

our shots. And we're supposed to do a full rehearsal tomorrow, too."

"Don't cancel," I said. "I'll find Buzzie for you if I have to turn this town upside down."

"I wouldn't advise it," Sid murmured. "Some mighty funny bugs might come crawling out from under." He paused. "Serious-like, now—you really think you can locate him?"

"I will damned well have to," I replied, honestly. "Don't worry. That's my job."

I hung up, shaking my head. That was my job, all right. Worrying about Buzzie Waters. He'd been giving me grief all summer long, playing coy about signing for the fall series and ducking out of appointments with the sponsor, the agency, and the network reps.

And there hadn't been a thing I could do about it, either. Buzzie had come close to copping himself an Emmy this past season, even if the critics didn't like his brand of mugging. So there was no sense trying to bluff him. He knew he was hot, knew he could hang his hat over the mike in any network he pleased.

On top of that, some two-bit ghost writer got hold of him and started to work on one of those crummy biographies. You know the pitch—the one about the poor little neglected kid who over-compensates for his childhood by growing up to be a loud-mouthed comic, just because he's insecure.

For some reason, this was the last straw. I've worked with names for twenty years, and let me tell you one thing—this "insecurity" gag is phoney.

Take Benny. He used to think he couldn't work a live audience without a violin in his hand. So he left vaude and went into broadcasting, and he doesn't need any benefits. I could use his brand of insecurity, believe me. Ed Wynn made with the funny hats, but he did all right for himself playing straight on *Playhouse 90* and in the flicks too. And there are a dozen others.

No, this poor-little-comic routine is something I can't buy. A lot of people, in and out of show biz, are insecure. But they don't go around lushing it up, putting solid gold monograms on their garters, and punching columnists at Toots Shor's.

Let's face it, Buzzie was a no-goodnik. But where was he?

I called a couple of numbers on my private line. A bookie I knew, and an entrepreneur who ran a floating crap-game, and a motherly old dowager named Maggie who could supply you with anything you happened to need at a moment's notice, including Shetland ponies.

Then, as a last resort, I called Buzzie's house. Not his hotel here in town, but the big house out on the Island. He never went there after Labor Day, but I was run-

ning out of numbers and I had to call somebody.

Sure enough, someone picked up the receiver.

"Sherwood Forest," a voice said. "Robin Hood speaking."

"Buzzie! This is Millaney. What the hell's the big idea? Don't you know you're supposed to be at rehearsal—"

"We are not amused. The King has declared a holiday, and there's dancing in the streets."

He was sauced to the eyeballs.

"Are you coming in, or must I come out there and drag you in?"

"I'm *awfully* sorry, that is *not* the correct answer! But thank you for being with us, and as a consolation prize, our sponsor wants you to have this glamorous pinup of a trained seal with a very slippery figure and a plunging neckline."

"Stay where you are," I told him. "I'm coming right out."

And out I went. I didn't call Sid back, and I didn't even tell my girl I was going—just ducked through my private exit and took my own car from the parking lot across the street.

It wasn't a pleasant drive. I was fighting traffic, fighting the heat, and fighting the aggravation which kept tightening my scalp. There comes a time when even Miltown isn't the answer.

On the face of it, maybe it doesn't sound so bad. Comics have gotten drunk and missed a rehearsal before; you charge it off to the client somehow and forget it. But Buzzie wasn't my only problem this week. Already I'd had a rough session with our new cowboy star, who tried to cut his wrists over an unhappy love-affair. I'd told him never to get mixed up with a chorus-boy in the first place. Also there was—

But why go on? That's the kind of a job I have—trouble-shooter and nursemaid and keeper all rolled into one. I ask myself that "But why go on?" question a dozen times a week, and the answer always comes back in good round numbers. The only thing is, this week I'd asked myself the same question a dozen times a day.

I guess it was the old story; you know the one. Buzzie Waters used to tell it himself, and I always though it was pretty funny. About the old guy whose car breaks down and wants to borrow a horse and buggy from his stingy neighbor. On the way over to the neighbor's house he keeps thinking how stingy the guy is, and rehearsing in his mind how he'll refuse to loan him anything. Finally he gets all worked up, and when the neighbor answers the doorbell the guy just looks at him and yells, "All right —you know what you can do with your horse and buggy!"

That's the mood I was in when I drove into Buzzie Waters' place, and it was no joke. I'd made up my mind there'd better not be any

more trouble, because I just couldn't take it.

I didn't see Buzzie's car out front, and that was a bad sign. Maybe he'd run out on me. When I rang the bell and got no answer, I was sure of it. Then I got mad and started to use the big brass doorknocker, and that was my mistake. The thing was redhot from the heat of the sun, and I burned two fingers.

That's when I started swearing and kicking at the door. And then stood there, feeling foolish, when the door swung open.

I went inside, where it was cooler. I wasn't cooler, though. The air-conditioning didn't help me a bit. If I shivered a little, it was from rage.

"All right, Buzzie!" I shouted. "You can come out now. I know you're in there."

Some dialogue; I sounded like a ten-year-old kid. Realizing it didn't help me feel any better, either. I ran down the hall and into the library. Or what had been designed as a library until Buzzie bought the place and turned it into a bar.

It was a bar now; there were bottles and glasses all over the place, and as I came in, I stepped in a big puddle of liquor on the floor. Buzzie must have been entertaining.

Well, he wasn't entertaining now. He was sprawled across the sofa, and he was out, cold.

He wore a dirty, beat-up sports outfit, and he hadn't shaved for two days, and he stank of liquor when I reached down and shook him.

"Huh?" he mumbled. "Who you? Millaney, huh? Go 'way."

I pulled him up to a sitting position.

"Snap out of it," I said. "You're coming with me."

"No. Why sh' I come 'th you?"

"Rehearsal, that's why."

"Don' wanna rehearsal. Don' have t' rehearsal."

"Damn it, I'm not taking any more from you! You're going to get under a shower and sober up, and I want you dressed and ready to go in twenty minutes, hear?"

"Lea'me alone. You're not my boss—"

I slapped him across the face.

He snarled at me. "Why, you—"

Then, all at once, he was on his feet, lunging forward. He swept his hand across the end-table, knocking a glass to the floor, but his fingers closed around the neck of a bottle. He gripped it and swung at me.

There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I brought my fist up hard and connected with his jaw. He went over backwards, taking the end-table with him. The glasses flew and shattered on the white marble floor beyond the rug, but all I heard was the nasty sound of his head hitting when he landed.

But everybody knows you can't

hurt a drunk. I knew it too, when I bent down and shook him. Then I wasn't so sure. He flopped limply, and it was like shaking a corpse. His eyes were open and rolled back, and I didn't like to look at them.

So I felt his wrist. His skin was whiter than the marble, and it might as well have been marble for all the pulse I could detect.

It was very quiet in the room. I could hear myself breathe, but I couldn't hear him.

And then I knew!

II

IT WAS EVEN quieter, three hours later, when my visitor arrived. The sunlight was fading fast but even in the dimness I could see his face. He looked more like Buzzie Waters than Buzzie did himself.

"Joe Traskin," I said, standing up. "You remember me. I'm Willis Millaney."

He gave me a funny grin. "Buzzie's boss," he said.

"I was. Up until this afternoon."

"What goes on h—?"

I didn't let him finish his sentence, just grabbed his arm and pulled him over behind the sofa. He stared down at Buzzie Waters.

"Accident," I said. Then I told him what had happened. It didn't take me very long, and I knew just what I was going to say. I knew everything perfectly, except the one thing I needed to know most—how he'd take it.

"Yeah, sure, I understand," said Joe Traskin. "But why are you telling me all this? Shouldn't you be talking to the police?"

I stared at him and slowly shook my head.

"I don't think so, Joe."

"But—"

"I could have called the police three hours ago, when this happened. But then what? I'd tell my story and they'd lock me up. Oh, maybe I'd get off with a manslaughter rap. Say a few years and good behavior. When I got out again I could find myself another job. Not exactly what I'm doing now, but something similar. Like say, lavatory attendant in a downtown hotel."

"I'm sorry, but I don't see where I fit into your troubles."

"Listen, Joe." I put my hand on his shoulder. "You don't get the drift yet, do you? I'm not talking about my troubles. Sure, I'll admit that's the first thing that ran through my mind when I found out what happened. But it's not important. This oh-God-what-have-I-done routine doesn't mean a damned thing. By the time I realized Buzzie Waters was dead I'd stopped the self-pity and started thinking like an executive vice-president again. Do you know how an executive vice-president thinks, Joe?"

"Do they?" He snapped it out,

just the way Buzzie would have done, and that helped.

I squeezed his shoulder. "Yes, That's my job. To think and to worry. Not about myself, but about my people. All my people, on all my shows. For instance, there are about seventy-five of them connected with *Buzzin' Around,* in one capacity or another. And they're the ones I'm thinking about right now. Killing Buzzie Waters is one thing, and that's bad enough. But murdering their chances, murdering their livelihood is something else again. I made up my mind, Joe. I can't do it."

"But what—?"

"Listen, Joe. There's an easy out. An obvious solution. It's staring me right in the face."

"What are you talking about?"

"You, Joe. From now on, you're Buzzie Waters."

"Hey—"

"Don't interrupt, Joe. Let me do the talking. I've got it all figured out. Here, sit down."

He gave me a funny look, but he sat down. And right there is when I knew I had him. I started to pitch.

"Let's see how it adds up," I said. "First of all, nobody knew Buzzie was out here. From the looks of things he must have driven out alone late last night and sat up drinking by himself. Sid somebody saw him in Lindy's. I'll check that and get all the information—who was with him, what he'd been doing. All you need to do is pick it up from there."

"But—"

"Listen to me." I lit a cigarette and my hands weren't even trembling now. "I've been over the room. There's no blood, and this mess looks like an ordinary drinking-bout. Besides, what's to prevent cleaning it up? Nobody is going to be suspicious anyway, because Buzzie Waters is still around."

"That's right," Joe nodded. "There he is. And what will you do about it?"

"*We* will do something," I told him. "There's a nice deep quarry just across the bluffs, and it's a dark night. A few heavy rocks, and there's no problem."

"No problem. Buzzie Waters goes on as usual." He paused. "But what happens to Joe Traskin?"

I met his stare. "Nothing," I said. "Let's be frank. Whatever did happen to you before you met Buzzie last year? You were just another working stiff, weren't you? Drove a truck or something, no family, no ties."

"You've been reading my mail," he murmured.

"I checked. It's my business to check. But never mind that, now. Let's get back to facts. Buzzie picked you up because of the resemblance. It's damned close, too, and that was a break for you. You acted as his stand-in. You even

showed up for public appearances in his place, and I think once or twice he rang you in to pose for publicity shots when he wanted out. Is that right?"

Joe didn't answer, but he grinned.

"All right. So you had a year as his stand-in. And then, last week, he fired you. What happened?"

He shrugged. "I checked out of my hotel, took a room uptown. I been there most of the time, since."

"And when you ran out of dough, you'd move," I went on. "End up driving a truck somewhere again. Maybe once in a while somebody would tell you you looked like Buzzie Waters, but that's all. I hate to say it, but you're expendable, Joe. Without the stand-in job, you're a small nothing. Nobody around the industry even wondered what became of you when Buzzie let you go. You just disappeared. Why, you don't even have an agent, do you? And no family ties to worry about."

"You got hold of me in one hell of a hurry, though," he remarked.

"Just luck." I pulled a slip of paper out of my pocket. "I found your name and number written down on this scratch-pad on the desk."

Joe nodded. "That's right, I remember calling him when I moved, to give him my new number, just in case. Maybe he was going to give me a jingle today."

"We'll never know," I told him. "And it isn't important. What is important is that you can drop out of the picture without anybody getting suspicious. You just left town, that's all."

"It still sounds risky to me."

"Nonsense. Remember, seven-eight years ago, this guy who worked a lot of shows as a walk-on because he was a double for Harry Truman? How often do you wonder whatever became of him?" I paused. "No, there won't be any danger. I promise you that. And believe me, I have more at stake than you do. But the moment I saw your name and number on that scratch-pad, I knew I had the problem licked."

"All right." Joe lit a cigarette of his own. "Maybe I can vanish without trouble. But that doesn't mean I can show up again as Buzzie Waters."

I shrugged. "I'd think about it if I were you, Joe. I'd think about it very strongly. It'd be worth your while."

"How much?"

It was my turn to grin, when I saw his face, heard the note of anticipation in his voice.

'I won't offer you a cent," I said. "Not a cent. All I offer you is the Buzzie Waters name. And his house here, and the place in town, and his cars, and his bank-account, and his present weekly income. Plus his contract, his fame, his future. The works, on a silver

platter. All you have to do is say yes."

"That's all, eh?' Joe gripped the arms of his chair. "Aren't you forgetting a few things? Buzzie Waters is—was—a great comic. He has to get up there and do a performance every week. He's supposed to kill the people."

"You know better than that, Joe. We've got four writers who make all the funnies. And the way Buzzie goofed off last season, he didn't even bother to sit in on the script-sessions. Didn't really memorize his routines, either; just read the stuff off the teleprompter. With his own mugging and flycatching, of course. But you can get up on his voice and delivery and technique in a week.

"I'll see that you get a chance to study kinies of all his old shows. Since he never did any singing or dancing, there's nothing to it. Buzzie is a synthetic product, Joe—just a combination of the proper writers, the right buildup. If I had your resemblance, I could do him myself."

Joe nodded. "You didn't think much of him, did you, Millaney?"

"Who did?" I stood up. "Let's be honest. If his friends knew what happened here today, they'd chip in and buy me a medal. Only they don't, and besides, I doubt if he had any friends."

"Maybe you're prejudiced." Joe hesitated. "But there's one thing that's certain. He knew an awful lot of people. Perhaps I can get away with the Buzzie Waters routine on camera, but what about in private, with everybody who knew him?'

It was time for me to grin again. "You've already had a little experience at that. You stooged for him with the photographers, and nobody knew the difference. The rest is just a matter of boning up on the part—learning the details of his life and his associations. I'll get you every clip on Buzzie that was ever printed. I'll see to it that you have access to everything in our files on the guy, and we've got a pretty complete history. I told you I was thinking like an executive, Joe. I worked all this out from the moment I decided to call you, and I've covered all the angles.

"Buzzie had no regular business manager, and he wasn't buddy-buddy with anyone except a lot of stooges and drinking companions. Another break for us—I happened to know he was between psychiatrists, too. So there's nobody really intimate with the guy. And as for details, I'm sure I can supply you with the works. In a week you'll be more like Buzzie than Buzzie himself. Except you won't be drinking so much, you won't be such a goof-off, and you won't be such an egotistical, loud-mouthed heel."

"You hated him, didn't you?"

I sighed. "How do you suppose old Doc Frankenstein felt after he saw what kind of a monster he cre-

ated? That's how I felt about Buzzie. I made him out of nothing."

"And now I'm supposed to be the new monster."

"What have you got to lose?"

Joe stared at me. "All right," he said. "What have I got to lose?"

I held out my hand.

He had to reach in order to shake it, because we were standing on either side of the body.

III

IN TELEVISION YOU do it with a dissolve or fade-out. In books you do it with asterisks or a new chapter-heading. But in life, you have to live through the passage of time.

Luckily for me, there were no hitches.

Getting rid of the body in the quarry after dark was no problem. It was no picnic, either, but it had to be done. And once we did it, the worst was over—for me, anyway.

The big burden fell on Joe from then on, and I was happy to see him pitch in and do a job. All the details went through without a hitch—checking out of his room, getting rid of his few personal effects, moving into Buzzie's place. I rigged up a story for Sid Richter about finding Buzzie and sobering him up, and the rehearsal went through as scheduled the next day. If Joe made any slips, they were probably attributed to a hangover. And I didn't hear about any slips.

I spent a lot of time with him during the next two weeks, giving him the data he needed and coaching him on names, associations, references, friendships—or what passed for friendships in Buzzie's world of beards, hunkers, stooges, moochers, and sycophants. It all seemed remarkably easy, once he got into the swing of it. We even had penmanship lessons; in a few days he had the signature down pat, and the kinescopes gave him all he needed to know about Buzzie the comic.

Of course I sweated a lot, and as the date for the first show approached my forehead was never dry. But somehow, even at the worst, it seemed easier than if the real Buzzie had been around. Whatever headaches came up, I at least knew I had somebody willing to work them out *with* me; we operated as a team. With Buzzie, I'd have been fighting him all the way.

Joe did a job for me. He was a quick study, and I kept him busy, protected him from interviewers and from most of the hangers-on. Getting ready for the fall season was a perfect excuse, too. And once he got over the hurdle of the first show, I had a feeling we'd be in business.

So he sweated bullets, and I sweated atomic bombs, and the big night came, and then my forehead was dry again.

He went on and he fractured them.

He was as good as Buzzie had ever been. Hell, he was *better* than Buzzie! There wasn't a fluff, there wasn't a boo-boo. He cut a fine show.

And after it was over, he went home to his apartment and slept, instead of going out and throwing cheesecake at the waiters.

Truth to tell, *I* was the one who went out and celebrated. I had a feeling I'd earned it.

In the weeks that followed, everything was copacetic. No problems. It got so that I left Joe pretty much on his own; he seemed able to handle his own life without any more help. Oh, I kept tabs on him, of course, and we got together, but there were no bloopers, no hitches.

"How do you like it?" I asked him.

"Never enjoyed anything so much in my life," he said, and I could see he was telling the truth.

So I stopped worrying.

By the time two months had gone by, I'd almost forgotten the way things had happened. I know it sounds crazy, but that's the truth. The real Buzzie Waters faded out of my memory, and so did that unpleasant afternoon. All water under the dam. Or in the quarry . . .

Then the cat came back.

It wasn't a cat, really. It was a canary.

She twittered her way past my secretary one morning and took a perch in my private office.

"Melody Morgan!" I exclaimed, with a delight I did not feel.

But here she was. Melody Morgan—Buzzie's little playmate.

The minute I saw her, I started sweating again. She had no business in my office. A small-time chirp never gets that far, usually; in fact, she wouldn't even dream of trying to see me. Let alone saunter in, sit down, and dangle her calves over the side of my best overstuffed chair.

But here she was.

"Something I can do for you?" I asked.

"Why, yes, Mr. Millaney. I think there is." She fluttered her eyelashes and gave me that coy look. "I want a job."

"A job, eh?"

"I'm a singer, you know."

"Yes, I know." I pursed my lips. "But that's not my department. You want Loomis over in Auditions, or Seagrist, in Casting."

"No Mr. Millaney. I've talked to them. They don't have anything to suggest."

"Things are tight, eh?"

She smiled. "Not exactly. To be perfectly frank, Mr. Millaney, they don't think I'm a very good singer. That's why they never hire me."

"Oh."

"And since I'm being frank, I might as well admit that *I* don't

think I'm a very good singer, either."

"But still, you think I'd hire you."

"Right, Mr. Millaney."

"Any reason?"

"Yes. I'm a good friend of Buzzie Waters'."

"I know."

"I've seen quite a lot of him these past few weeks."

"I—I didn't know that." I didn't, either, and I cursed myself.

"You're a busy man, Mr. Millaney. You can't keep track of everything."

"That's true."

It *was* true, but that was one thing I *should* have kept track of. Joe would naturally have to see Buzzie's girl-friend, sooner or later. But why couldn't it have been later?

"Anyway, I'd like you to give me a job," she said.

"You have a particular show in mind?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter, really. You can give me a general contract with the network. I can do guest-shots, fillins, standby availabilities." Melody Morgan's eyelashes stopped fluttering and she gave me a level look. "In fact, since I'm really a lousy singer, I'll give you a break. I won't actually insist on appearing at all. Just give me a contract and that'll be good enough."

"Well." I hesitated. "We do have a stock contract deal, yes. The usual minimum, on a six-month option basis—"

"Please." She stood up. "I'd like a five-year deal. The non-cancellable kind. And I wasn't thinking of the minimum."

"What were you thinking of?" I asked.

"One thousand a week."

She sang the words at me, real pear-shaped tones. Her delivery was perfect.

I stood there. I had a lot of answers, and none of them were any good. I could have asked her if she was crazy, if she'd flipped, who did she think she was, who did she think she was talking to? But I knew these lines wouldn't help. Buzzie Waters' four writers couldn't feed me the topper, either.

I cleared my throat and said, "Does Buzzie know you're here?"

She laughed. "Certainly not. We both are aware of that. Buzzie doesn't know anything, any more. Does he, Mr. Millaney?"

She saw the look on my face, and she laughed again. "I won't ask you to answer that last question. It might be embarrassing. Just give me your answer on the job."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to ask the last question again. And a lot of other questions. Such as whatever became of that character Buzzie fired, that Joe Traskin? I haven't seen him around lately—or have I?"

I leaned forward. "How did you—?"

"Please! Now you're embarrassing me! When a girl is as friendly as I was with Buzzie, she notices things, you know? Little changes, differences. And she begins to put two and two together. Then she starts checking up. Until things add up."

"What do they add up to?"

"One thousand a week." She was singing again. And there was only one way to keep her from singing.

"All right," I said. "But I needn't remind you what the deal is. You'll have to keep your mouth closed."

"A pleasure."

It would take a lot of fixing, a lot of squaring. It would take a lot of explaining as to why I'd coughed up a big non-cancellable to a two-bit thrush. In the end, I might have to pay for it out of my own pocket. But there was no other way. Not now. Not until I talked to Joe.

IV

JOE TRASKIN couldn't help me. "I tell you, I don't know a damned thing about it," he said. "I never guessed she suspected anything."

"But why did you have to hang around?"

"You know the answer to that one. Because she and Buzzie were so close. I couldn't drop her, or there'd be real trouble, right away. You know he was keeping her in that apartment of hers. She'd stir up a stink—"

'What do you call this?" I asked. "A thousand a week for five years! That smells to high heaven."

"Tough. But that's the way the ball bounces."

"It could stop bouncing."

"What do you mean?"

I stared at the ceiling. "Suppose you have a pet, Joe. Say, a canary. And you get tired of it. Maybe you don't want to hear it singing any more. What do you do?"

He wasn't staring at the ceiling. He was staring at me, and shaking his head. "Get this chum," he said. "I'm very fond of pets. And this pet in particular. I like things just the way they are. If I'm going to be Buzzie Waters, I'm going to have everything he had. That was our deal."

"Yes, but what's so special about this dame? I mean, you can have anything you want. My friend Maggie would get you—"

"I'm not interested in Shetland ponies. This canary satisfies me. And you want me to be satisfied, don't you, pal?"

"Yes. Of course I do, Joe."

"Call me Buzzie. Everybody else does." He bent over the desk. "And if you want them to keep on calling me Buzzie, you'd better not go rumbling the details. You

got away with it once, but you can't be that lucky twice in a row. Leave well enough alone."

"All right."

Only it wasn't all right, and I knew it. The thousand bucks was bad enough, but Joe's new attitude was worse. He'd never tried to throw his weight around before, and it was a bad sign.

Before the week was out there was a worse one. He called and asked me to come up to his town apartment for a talk.

"How about tonight, at nine, sharp?"

I agreed.

I'd be there, and I'd be sharp. It was time to clamp down, once and for all.

Joe was waiting for me when I arrived. He looked very much at home, wearing one of Buzzie's monogrammed robes and one of Buzzie's big, phoney smiles. And I could tell he'd been sampling some of Buzzie's favorite after-dinner liquers, too. The coffee-table was loaded with bottles.

"Welcome to humble abode," he greeted me. "Please to sit down."

"Never mind the routine," I told him. "I've got a few things to say to you, and I want you to listen carefully. It's time I straightened you out. Frankly, I don't like this independent attitude of yours. From now on, I'm issuing orders. Here's how we're going to work together in the future."

"Save it," he said. "It won't be necessary."

"Why not?"

"Because we won't be working together in the future." He went around in back of his desk. "I said I had news for you. Look at this."

He flipped a sheaf of papers at me.

I glanced at the heading. "A contract? And with those lousy—"

"Please. You're speaking about my future employers, as of five short weeks from now."

"But you belong to us."

"On thirteen-week options, with cancellation privileges after a month's advance notification."

"You wouldn't leave *Buzzin' Around.*"

"Certainly not. I'll take it with me. Oh, not the name. But most of my people will come."

"*Your* people? Who do you think you are?"

"Buzzie Waters. And so do they, and so does everyone. You fixed that, didn't you?"

My throat hurt. It was hard to talk. "But you can't quit."

"For seven grand more a week I can do anything. You won't match the figure."

"Of course I won't." I stared down at the coffee-table. "I don't have to. We're in this thing together. We'll stay in. I made you and I can break you."

"I don't get it."

"Then let me spell it out for you." I smiled at him. It hurt to

smile, too, but I made it. "When I called you over to Buzzie's house that afternoon I told you I was an executive, that I had everything figured. Well, it was the truth. I knew just what I was doing, and why.

"I could have disposed of his body alone and called you in later. But I had a reason for wanting you there, to help me. Not because I needed your physical assistance, but because this made you an accessory to manslaughter. An accessory after the fact, as they say in court. Or will say, anytime you try to cross me up."

"So that's how it is!"

I nodded. "Maybe you think I'd never confess. But if you walk out on me, I will. Because you know what happens. If *Buzzin' Around* goes off, it's my neck. They'll crucify me. Letting you get away will wash me up with this network and any other outfit in the business. I've put my life into this job. If I lose it, I might as well lose the rest, too. So I'm warning you right now—walk out, and I'll talk. You'll get at least five years."

"You won't stop at anything, will you?"

"That's right," I said. "I'm an executive."

"You're a murderer," he murmured. "And that's the real reason I signed this contract. You see, I hadn't really figured it out."

"What do you mean?"

"Think back, now," he said. "When I went out to the house you told me that what happened there was an accident. I was willing to buy that. And I could see some sense in protecting you, and a lot more sense in protecting all the other people on the show. After all, it wouldn't help anyone if I turned you in. So I went along with the gag.

"Then I found out you really were a killer. I found it out the other day, when you asked me to help you get rid of Melody. Only a real killer thinks like that, Millaney.

"That's when I decided to walk out on you. And that's what I'm going to do."

"You'd better not try," I whispered. "I'll talk."

He shook his head. "You forget. I have an alibi."

I stared at him.

"Yes, an alibi. Melody. She'll swear I spent that afternoon with her. I'm covered." He grinned. "Matter of fact, I *did* spend part of the afternoon with her. And some people saw me go in. None of them saw me come out again, luckily enough."

I managed to choke out the words. "But how can you be covered? You weren't at Melody's place. You didn't even know Melody then. She never even met you, until after Buzzie died."

He grinned again.

"I've got news for you," he said. "Buzzie never died."

"But—" I could only stare.

"You killed Joe Traskin," he murmured. "I'm Buzzie Waters."

I just stood there, staring at the coffee-table. It whirled.

"Now let's play the flip side," he was saying. "I was out at my house when you called, sounding off. I didn't feel like making rehearsal, and I didn't feel like putting up with your ravings. You said you were coming right over.

"So I got this great idea for a gag. I called Joe up and told him to get out there on the double, in a cab. When he showed up I offered him his old job back—on condition that he stand in for me and listen to you blow your top. We had a couple of drinks on it and he said okay. But he was worried the landlady at his rooming house might latch onto his belongings, because he was back on his rent. I told him that was no problem. If he gave me the key I'd stop by and settle with her, then bring his junk out to the house. That was the deal.

"Only on the way I dropped in to see Melody. We had a ball, laughing it up whenever we thought of you screaming at poor Joe. Then I left her and stopped at his place. That's when you called.

"Of course I didn't figure what had happened. Not until I walked in and found you—and Joe. The poor jerk must have kept right on hitting the bottle after I left him. I don't blame him; he didn't want to face you. Well, the gag backfired on him, didn't it?

"But when you told me about the accident, I decided the gag had to go on. And that's when it got really big—when you made this terrific deal with me to play myself! Funniest damned thing I ever heard of—nobody'd ever believe it, would they? And that's why I'm not in any trouble. Who'd ever think I'd help get rid of my double's body, just so I could play myself? It doesn't make sense, because I have no motive. You're the guy with the motive. Me, I've got Melody and my alibi."

He started to laugh.

I almost moved.

"And Melody! That was the real topper, when I told her to give you the old shakedown routine. She said she thought you'd snap your cap!"

I tried to move, but I couldn't. "So you put her up to it?" I whispered. "You weren't content with what you'd done, you had to let her bleed me, too?"

He nodded. "It was a gag, like I said. My best gag. A real weirdie, but then you don't have a sense of humor, do you? You don't understand what makes a comic, because you're just an executive. Or you were." He waved the contract at me. "After I walk out, we'll see. There's no way you can stop me, you and your executive mind—"

"Oh yes there is," I said, and I

could talk loudly now and I could move swiftly. I had one of the bottles from the coffee-table and I swung it up, and I swung it down, and I swung it again, and even after the bottle broke I kept on using the jagged piece in my right hand.

It was just like the scene out at the house, all over again. Except for one difference—now I didn't have any double to call in. And I couldn't think like an executive any more.

Buzzie Waters told the truth, there at the end. I'm a murderer.

And what can a murderer do now?

NEXT MONTH **A LONG SUSPENSE NOVELET**

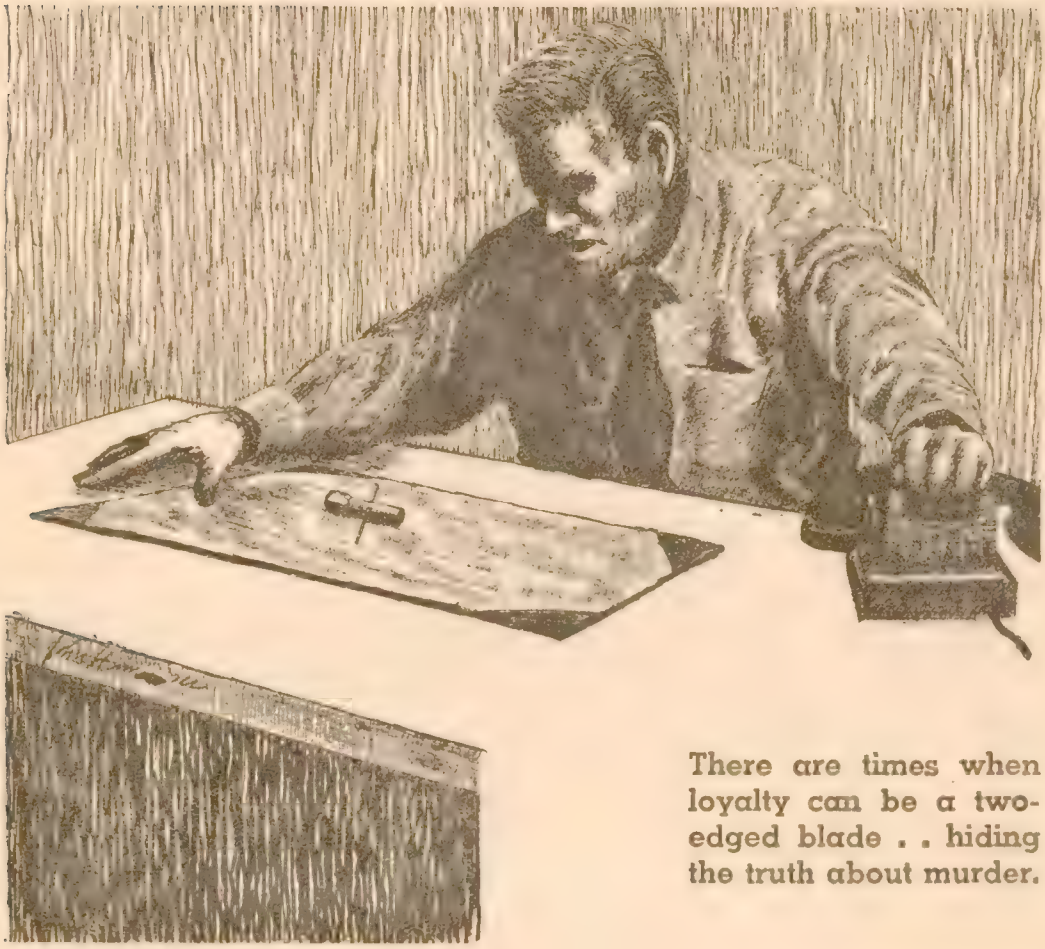
MURDER FOR MEMBERS ONLY

by NORMAN ANTHONY

Lou Calder was unanimously hated in the exclusive actor's club . . . it was no real surprise, then, the day he was murdered.

Key to Murder

by GLORIA ROOT SAVOLDI



There are times when loyalty can be a two-edged blade . . hiding the truth about murder.

IN THE LATE morning sun which burned through the flimsy paper shades of his tiny, hot bedroom, Gordon Peters stood before his dresser and considered the color of his necktie. His finely-shaped blond head was still shower-damp, and his skin tingled from after shave. Very deliberately he rejected a cloudy gold, a lemon, a pale pink

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with charcoal horses' heads. At last he knotted a somber blue and completed the ritual of dress down to the silver-plated cufflinks which his boss, Mr. Roberts, had given him, and reached for his hairbrush.

A loud, impatient knock at the front door caused his throat to tighten and his heart to skip a beat.

He knew in his bones it would be the police.

He hurried to the door before Red could get to it. When he opened it and stepped back and saw the two men standing there, one in a blue uniform, he felt exactly like what he was—an overgrown seventeen-year-old with too many freckles, a crazy cowlick and a talent for trouble.

Why couldn't they have waited another half hour, until his stepfather was out of the house? It was always like that. If he was hungry, and it was raining soup, he'd be caught with a fork.

"Who is it?" yelled Red.

"It's—the police," Gordan managed. His throat felt lined with sandpaper.

Red stormed into the living room, shaving cream on his heavy jaws, his thick auburn hair glistening with brilliantine. "What in hell have you done now?" he demanded.

Gordon had known that his stepfather would be furious. Red was always picking on him, just because he wasn't the man's real son. It was always 'What've you done now?' or 'You'll never amount to anything.' It didn't make sense, but it was like Red had hated him from the minute he'd found out he couldn't have any kids of his own.

"Nothing, Red—nothing, honest!" Gordon was painfully aware of his mother in the hallway, her grey-streaked hair in pin curls, her eyes round with fear.

"Can we come in?" asked one of the policemen.

"Yeah," said Red. "What's the kid done now?"

The men sat on the tired brown sofa and Gordon saw his mother smooth a throw rug with her toe. It was stifling in the small, overfurnished room and flies buzzed against the screens.

"I'm Sergeant Malloy," said the man in plainclothes, "and this is Corporal Smythe." The sergeant had a warm smile and a gentleness about his eyes unusual in a police officer. The other, plainly the younger, wore a stern, serious expression. He reminded Gordon of his former high school principal, 'Granite Face' Lee.

"There was a murder last night," Malloy said calmly. "A young lady named Laurie Craig. She was twenty years old. She was last seen alive at the skating arena where we've been told your son works as assistant manager."

"Gordon didn't know a thing about it," said his mother, almost too quickly. "We just read about

it in the newspaper—a little while ago."

Red glared at her, deep grooves running from his broad nostrils to the pulled-down corners of his mouth. She avoided his eyes, adding nervously: "We didn't tell Mr. Peters about it right away because—" She turned in helpless appeal to Gordon, her lips trembling a little.

"Because he always jumps to the wrong conclusions!" Gordon burst out angrily. "And he blames me for everything . . . whether I did it or not!"

"That damn skating rink! I told you it would lead to no good. And you—being so smart-alecky you couldn't even finish your last year of high school. And taking up with that—"

"Don't you say a word against Mr. Roberts," said Gordon, hotly. "He's a swell guy, and he treats me right!"

Red laughed. "Just because Roberts gives him a two-bit job, the kid here thinks he wears a halo."

Gordon felt his face burn. "Yeah? Well, when I needed a new pair of slacks for the prom last year, who got them for me? You told me to wear a pair with frayed cuffs."

"Aw, you—"

"And when I had get down to see my cousin Joe that time he was in the hospital, who let me use his car?"

"Watch your lip, young man."

"And something else. Remember the time I hurt my ankle playing basketball and I needed money for the doctor? Well, you didn't give me a lousy dime. It was Mr. Roberts again."

Red turned back to the policemen. "I still say Roberts is no good. A man forty-five years old hanging around with teenagers all the time, trying to act like 'em. If it turns out he did have something to do with the death of that girl, which I wouldn't put past him, the kid here probably would cover for him."

The two police officers exchanged meaningful looks. Then after a strained silence, Malloy asked, almost gently, "Gordon, did you see Miss Parker where you worked last night?"

"Yes sir, I did. She came in almost every night to skate."

"She worked at the dime store, in the same shopping center, didn't she?"

"Yes sir."

"You knew her pretty well, didn't you?" asked Malloy.

"We all did," said Gordon. "She came in a lot, like I said. We used her sometimes in skating shows."

"Was she your girl friend?" asked Corporal Smythe.

Gordon flushed. "No, nothing like that. Laurie was—well, she was everybody's girl friend." He thought, with a sudden pang of remembrance, what a 'regular guy'

she was, and how pretty she'd looked that last evening, floating about in her pink skating skirt, her blonde pony tail swishing whenever she'd turn to wave at somebody, her charm bracelet with all the four-leaf clovers tinkling about her wrist.

He'd skated with her on some of the *Couples Only*. She was pretty, all right—full baby face, a cleft dimple in her small chin. But he knew that underneath that pretty, flirty surface she could be tough if she wanted to be.

"For one thing," he said, "Laurie was much older than me."

"She was only twenty," Corporal Smythe reminded him.

"How old are you, Gordon—about seventeen?" asked Malloy.

"Yes sir, seventeen."

He turned to Smythe, smiling, "Believe me, Corporal, twenty *is* a lot older than seventeen."

The corporal smiled for the first time. "Yeah—I see what you mean." He turned back to Gordon, his eyes again like granite. "Did you ever have a date with this girl?"

Gordon fingered the catch to his cufflinks and said, softly, "Well, I don't think you'd call it exactly a date. It was more like—you know, brother and sister stuff. I met her at the arena once on my off day, and we skated. We had a coke or two."

"You didn't pick her up at her home?"

"No." He made the denial quickly.

"Did you escort her home afterwards?"

"No sir."

"When did you last see her?" questioned Malloy.

He said, "Around nine-fifteen, I guess. We close at ten o'clock and Laurie usually left a little ahead of the crowd. Her folks were pretty strict with her about what time she got home. She gave some people the impression she was—well, kind of fast. But she wasn't."

"In your book, she was a good kid. Is that it?" asked Malloy.

Gordon flushed. "Well—according to some of the fellows who dated her, you couldn't get fresh with Laurie and not get a slap." He added, quickly, "Of course, I only know what the fellows told me."

"Was she with anybody last night when she left?" asked Smythe.

Gordon tried to remember. "No sir. I don't believe she was."

"You can't be sure?"

"No."

"Think hard," said Malloy. "Did anything unusual, or out-of-the-ordinary, happen last night. Anything at all? Was somebody bothering her? Did she appear upset in any way?"

Gordon suddenly felt a tight constriction in the hard muscles of his stomach. The skate key! He had tried to erase it from his memory, but there it was, clear in every detail—the initials—his own,

scratched clearly on the handle—and the daub of red paint which further identified it. He had given it to Laurie to use. The wheels of one of her shoe skates had kept coming loose and he had loaned it to her a number of times. Finally, he had laughed. "Here, keep it the rest of the evening. Women, you're nothing but trouble."

"Thanks, Daddy-O," she had said. "I don't know what's wrong with this skate." As she had sailed off the floor, she had called back over her shoulder, "I'll return it when I leave."

She had forgotten to return it. He'd seen her toss it into her small black purse just as she'd started to leave. He had called out to her from behind the skate counter where he was getting ready for the closing stampede. But his voice was lost in the music, and the laughter of the skaters. His skate key must have been in her bag when she was killed. The police would find it and suspect him.

"Well," said Malloy patiently, "Can you think of anything?"

Gordon wet his lips and answered slowly, carefully, "No sir, not a thing. Just what I've told you."

"One thing more," Malloy said, "We place the time of the murder at about ten forty-five, on Lovers Cliff over on the Old Bay Road. Where were you between closing and eleven last night?"

Gordon watched the flies bang against the window screen. Sweat started to trickle down from his armpits. He should have expected that question, but he wasn't prepared for it. He could sense Red leaning forward in his chair, waiting almost gloatingly for his answer.

If he told them the truth that he had gone with some of the gang to drink beer at the Silver Slipper—Red would half-kill him.

He'd asked Mr. Roberts to cover for him, in case Red ever found out about it. His boss had already told the police he'd walked with him all the way home as usual.

"I was here, at home," he heard himself replying. "My boss brought me home, as usual—about twenty minutes after ten."

"Can you vouch for that, Mrs. Peters?"

His mother's face took on a pained look. She cleared her throat nervously. "Yes, officer. Gordon was here with me from about twenty minutes after ten on."

The police questioned him some more, but it was in a pea soup fog that he mumbled his answers. He kept cursing himself for lying . . . *What a cube you are,* he told himself. *You're probably putting a rope around your neck by lying about where you were. Only thing Red can do to you is beat you for drinking beer and lying about your age. And that skate key! Why didn't you say you'd*

practically put your calling card in Laurie's purse?

The longer the police officers questioned him, and the further they strayed from the question which had first set off the tangle of frightening thoughts and self-recriminations, the more unsure of himself he became.

He was aware of Red's cruel face, staring at him, hanging on his every word. Smythe and Malloy had arisen and were at the door before he realized, dully that his opportunity to straighten out the lies had passed. Never again would he have a chance to give the information freely. If he told them now, it would sound as though he were desperately trying to cover up by changing his story.

"You've been helpful," said Malloy, smiling, "we may want to question you again."

"Sure," said Gordon. "Anytime at all."

"Officers," his mother spoke up, "the newspaper didn't say . . . except that she was strangled and left in the bushes. Was it a case of—" she broke off, embarrassed.

Malloy's face suddenly seemed tired. He looked at her grimly. "Yes Mam, that's what it was."

A little after one o'clock, Roberts tapped his horn and Gordon ran out and got in the shiny new convertible. His boss moved over and Gordon slid in behind the wheel.

"I guess you heard about—everything," said Gordon Peters.

Roberts looked tired, and his kindly brown eyes were underlined with faint shadows. He tugged at the brim of his panama hat. "Yes. The police were around to question me this morning."

"Me too." Gordon waved absently to some children and they waved back. It always gave him a good feeling to feel the wheel in his hands, to see his neighbors' heads turn as he drove down the street of gate-enclosed frame houses. "I can't figure it, can you?"

Roberts shook his head, sadly.

"I mean a swell kid like Laurie always treating everybody right. I mean—who'd want to do a thing like that to Laurie?"

"It's a rotten thing."

The sun baked down on the medium blue car,n and Gordo took out his sunglasses and put them on. It had been just a few hours since his shower, but he felt he needed another.

"Thanks for covering for me about where I went last night," he said.

"That's all right," Roberts replied. "I told you I would. I figured Red would get a little nasty if he found out."

Gordon forced a laugh. "Boy, you're not just kidding."

They drove most of the way in silence. Gordon could see that his boss was upset, and didn't care to talk. He stared blankly into the

street, rubbing his hand absently over his trim mustache. *Poor guy. He had liked Laurie a lot.*

Gordon could easily picture them together, Laurie sitting on the edge of Mr. Roberts' big desk, swinging her legs—the two of them laughing and talking together, usually drinking cokes together, eating potato chips.

"Laurie, you make me feel like a young blade again," he had once told her. Mr. Roberts had never married and it was easy to imagine he could have been pretty sweet on Laurie, if he'd been younger. But, of course, there was a difference of twenty-five years between them.

"Well," said Gordon at last. "I guess the arena will get plenty of publicity in the papers."

"Yeah," said Roberts. "But I'm afraid not the kind we want."

A group of boys were waiting for them when Gordon eased the convertible into its parking place in back of the arena. In a way, he felt like a hero. The guys would be asking a million questions all day —asking him what the police had said and how they had acted.

Al Dorant, a lanky teenager with black, smoldering eyes, came up to the car. Gordon knew he had been sweet on Laurie. "Hi Gord, Hi Mr. Roberts! What's the latest? Did the police catch him yet? Who do you think did it, Mr. Roberts? I'd sure like to get my hands on that guy!"

"Hold on," said Roberts, getting out of the car. "One question at a time."

"Listen, guys, lay off," said Gordon. "He doesn't know any more about it than you do."

"That's all right, Gordon. I don't mind the questions. However," Roberts shrugged the shoulders of his light grey, pinstriped suit, "it's true. I only know what I read in the newspapers."

"Come on, Gordon," persisted Al, "you know me. Give us what *you* know."

Gordon said in an aside to Al, as he and Roberts crossed the pavement to the arena, "I'll talk to you later, Al."

Al nodded. "All right. It's only natural, I guess, for cops to ask a lot of questions."

Inside, men were cleaning the floor, getting it ready for the Saturday onslaught of girls and boys. The clatter of mops and push-brooms made lonesome, echoing sounds in the big room. The sun streamed through the rows of high-up windows, yet the bulk of the arena remained in darkness.

The refreshment stands stood empty and silent like the big hall itself, and there was a musty, moldy smell permeating everything—an odor which no amount of airing or cleaning could erase or even ameliorate.

"You know, Gordon," said Roberts later, from his orderly desk. "I've decided to donate a

percentage of tonight's proceeds to Laurie's mother."

Gordon looked down at the desk, and swallowed hard. He looked up again into the gentlest, kindest eyes he had ever seen. The flourescent light showed through Roberts' thin brown hair, and harshly emphasized the deepening lines of age in his face. Yet to Gordon at that moment no one had ever looked more terrific. His pride almost choked him as he said, simply, "Gosh, Mr. Roberts, that's swell."

It was about twenty minutes after opening when the little girl approached Gordon in the outer lobby. He was changing publicity posters and didn't see her at first.

"Gordon—" she said, hesitantly.

He looked up. She was about eleven years old, a skinny kid with a mess of freckles, and stringy blonde hair. She carried shoe skates—an old, beat-up pair that looked almost unsafe. She clutched the straps tight as she talked.

"Gordon—I know something about that girl who was killed."

He turned back to the posters.

"I really do. I'll tell you if you'll let me in free."

"Run on. I'm busy."

"My name's Hazel Walters." She chewed vigorously on a wad of bubble gum. "My mother's boyfriend said the newspapers said she was last seen alive leaving the arena. But I saw her after that."

Gordon turned around. Her large round eyes looked serious. But kids like her, he told himself —stringy hair, dirty face and dress —they'd pull anything to get in free. "So you saw her," he said, impatiently. "All right, tell me."

Hazel blew a big bubble. "Not until you let me in free," she said from the corner of her mouth.

He put the rest of the posters on the floor, took her by the arm and walked with her inside the arena. He called out to the ticket taker. "It's all right, Mrs. Burnside. She's with me."

He led her to a deserted spot in the carpeted inner lobby, beside a cold-drink machine. "Now," he said, "tell me what you saw and it had better be good."

"Well," she said, in a rush, "last night I was playing with my hula hoop out in the shopping center parking lot, and I saw her come out. I know it was her, because she had on that pink skating skirt and I've seen her around a lot." She popped her gum. "She was sure a good skater."

"What were you doing out so late?"

"I live just a few blocks from here. My mother works at the Pizza-terria." She winked at him. "Mom don't know what time I get home always."

"All right," he said, impatiently. "What did you see?"

The child swallowed.

"A fellow picked her up—I mean, tried to."

"What fellow? Would you know him if you saw him again?"

She nodded and went on with her story. "He goes up to her and says, 'How 'bout a ride home, Laurie?' And she says, 'Thanks, but I'm meeting a friend down the road.' Then he argues with her awhile, and drives off, mad. He has a dark blue car and it makes a lot of noise. You know, a hot rod."

"Do you see him in here?"

"Wait a minute," she added, "That's not all. I saw him drive down the street, pull up under some trees, turn off his lights and park. You know," she grinned, "like he was waiting for somebody."

"Then what happened?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. My mother came out of the pizza place, and I had to duck on home."

Gordon took her by the hand, and led her to the skate floor railing. "Do you see him in here—the fellow you were talking about?"

Hazel chewed harder on her gum and looked around the floor. "Yeah, there he is—the tall boy with the long black hair, bending over to fix his skate."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure as sure."

When the boy straightened up and faced him, Gordon saw that it was Al Dorant.

THAT NIGHT in bed, Gordon slept fitfully. His dreams and half-dreams were invaded by the street noises—the big trucks lumbering along, rattling windows, blasting, asphyxiating fumes, the drunken battle raging across the street, his stepfather snoring in the next room. And there was the summer heat, penetrating, exhausting.

He got up at last. He slipped downstairs quietly, and went out into the small yard, where he buried his face in the cool, fragrant profusion of honeysuckle that grew in a tangle over his mother's small white trellises.

He thought about Al. It didn't seem possible!

In school, Al had been his friend. In gym that first day, out for basketball, it was Al who had singled him out—a new kid, green as grass and so scared he couldn't sink a basket if they'd lowered it to knee level—and taught him the ropes.

All the pointers, like how to make a hook shot, how to dribble nice and low to the floor, how to grab a rebound for a fast break. Al had helped him to conquer his fear and uncertainty. Al had helped him on the baseball field and on the track team, too. He was an upper classman. But he was never too busy, or unconcerned, to notice a new guy and lend a hand.

Al was always in trouble at school, some of it caused by his stubborn refusal to bend to authority, and his lack of bookish ways. But some of it had been pinned on

him by guys who were jealous. Yet—killing somebody. Al just didn't seem capable of that. Cutting school and taking part in rumbles, maybe. But killing . . .

Al liked Laurie—and although he usually made out pretty good with girls—she never gave him a tumble. Except to skate with him now and then in skating competitions. Al's long legs usually could outdistance the best of the skaters.

At work all day, he'd been avoiding Al. Whenever Al would skate up to him, start to question him about what the police said, he would find some excuse to get away. Like being needed in the office, or behind the skate counter or in the ticket office. Al finally stopped asking and went away.

"Nervous, Dad," he had grumbled, "never saw you this busy before."

Gordon didn't know why, but he couldn't look Al in the eyes, after what that kid Hazel had said.

He breathed deeply of the cool air and tried to imagine, just for a moment, that it had been Al. He could picture Al offering Laurie a ride in his rod, and her turning him down. Then he could see Al, mad and hurt maybe, driving down the street to wait for her again. He could have talked her into the ride after all, or even forced her into the car some way.

Their conversation wasn't hard to figure. A big mouth sounding off to impress Laurie, she being cold as ice toward him. Then he could picture Al's driving, despite Laurie's protests, to Lovers Cliff. There, in the moonlight and romantic quiet of the place, Al could have grabbed for her, and Laurie struggled with him.

In the struggle, she could have screamed out, and Al could have become panicky, scared stiff. He could have hit her with something—a stone, anything at hand—in a moment of desperate panic. And then . . .

It didn't fit. Something, some detail, was badly out of focus. Which was it? He fell asleep there in the yard, in the cool grass, before he could figure it out.

Next afternoon, Malloy and Smythe were waiting at the arena. When he and Roberts drove up, the officers got out of their car and came toward them.

"Good afternoon," said Roberts agreeably.

"We have a new lead on the Craig case, "said Malloy." If you don't mind, we'd like to question you again."

"Certainly. Let's go in where it's cooler."

Inside his office Roberts offered the men a drink from his private bar behind the desk.

"No thanks, not while on duty," said Corporal Smythe.

"We think we might have our man," said Malloy.

Gordon stiffened.

"Young fellow named Al Dorant," he went on. "Either of you know him?"

"Certainly," said Roberts. "He skates here a lot. I use him for shows now and then."

"How about you, Gordon?"

Gordon looked down at his hands, his lips suddenly tight. "I know him."

"Know him well?"

"Pretty well. Knew him at school, last year."

Malloy got up from his chair and walked about the room, looking idly at the rows of photographs of skaters on the wall. He swung quickly, suddenly, and looked Gordon straight in the eye.

"Then why didn't you report that you heard he was with Laurie Craig just before she was killed?"

Gordon started to sweat under his softly starched collar.

"Luckily our eyewitness—a little girl named Hazel Walters—told her mother and she informed us."

His eyes took on a hard, cold glint. "Were you two in this together? Is that why you tried to hold out on us?"

"No!" Gordon shouted. "Honest, I didn't have a thing to do with it." He looked down at his hands again. "I don't know why I didn't tell you about Al. I didn't know if the little girl's story was true."

"That," said Malloy, coldly, "is for us to decide."

"We've booked the boy on suspicion of murder," said Smythe.

Roberts looked surprised and Gordon spoke up, quickly, "You have got Al in jail—just on what that little kid said?"

"Not just that. You see, Al has evidence of fingernail scratches and bruises about his face and neck. Claims he was in a rumble over at Western High. But his story doesn't check out. We can't get anybody who says he saw Al there."

Gordon moistened his lips. "Maybe," he said, "the other guys are afraid to tell, because they might get a beating from their parents. I'd be scared to tell anyone I was in a rumble. My old man would beat me."

"Maybe. But Al was in love with Laurie Craig, and she wouldn't give him the time of day. Spurned love . . . a strong motive."

"I can't believe Al would do a thing like that," said Gordon.

"Maybe not," said Malloy. "But we're holding him until we're sure."

THAT NIGHT did not see a usual Sunday crowd. The huge floor, usually a busy freeway, with lone skaters weaving in and out, couples, threes, skating arm-in-arm, now was almost deserted. There were a few teenagers in their tight jeans, open-neck shirts, and a sprinkling of little kids. There were also a few parents who had come to watch.

"Forget the signs, Gordon," said Mr. Roberts, surveying the almost empty floor. "Keep the *All Skate* on most of the evening."

"Yes sir. I guess the mothers are afraid to let their kids out until they catch the character."

Hazel Walters, wearing a oversized pair of pedal pushers, waved cheerfully and Gordon waved back, half-heartedly.

"Yeah," said Roberts, "I guess you're right."

"I can't believe Al did it, can you?" Gordon asked.

"I don't know," answered Roberts, thoughtfully, "you can't always tell what goes on inside a person. Come on in the office. Let's get that book work finished."

"Okay, boss."

Gordon followed Roberts into the office. He noted, proudly as always, his own name on the door under Roberts'.

"Here's the column of receipts for the month," said Roberts, "I'd like you to copy these figures in the ledger."

Gordon took the ledger and arranged it on the desk. "Go ahead, Mr. Roberts, if you've something else to do. I'll get it fixed up in about fifteen minutes."

"Fine. I want to check the popcorn machine. It's been acting up again."

Roberts started out the door, then came back. "By the way," he said, reaching in his pocket then tossing something on the desk, "You left this in my car the other day. You ought to be more careful with it."

When Roberts had left the office, Gordon stared in disbelief.

There, on the mahogany desk, on top of the ledgers and gate receipts, lay his skate key. The one he had loaned Laurie on Friday night. Slowly, he picked it up, examined it.

The initials, G.P., the daub of red paint.

It was impossible! He had seen Laurie toss it in her small black purse that night, just before . . . He had seen her. There could be no mistake.

Sudden horror engulfed him. His brain reeled, and he felt almost physically ill.

Roberts!

No! No! It was unbelievable.

He buried his head in his hands. Childishly, he wanted to cry, but his eyes were dry. Confused, feeling a need to get away by himself, he got up and left the office. Outside, he bumped into a woman and her small boy.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" she exclaimed angrily.

One of the fellows, Barney Rosser, skated over to him. "Hey! What's this I hear about Al? Do you think Al did it?"

Gordon felt like a sleepwalker. The heat, the musty smell, the earsplitting organ music, the lights flickering from the huge glass-

faceted ball in the center of the hall, seemed remote, unreal—held suspended in time and space. "I don't know," he mumbled softly, "I don't know."

"Hey, you look funny," said Barney. "You sick or something?"

Without answering, Gordon made his way out back where it was quiet and dark. He sat on the back steps of the building. There were millions of stars above, shedding a misty light. The moon was a dim circle and held a promise of rain. He clamped his hands to his ears to shut out the organ music. "No! No! No!"

After a while, he looked quietly at the sky, thinking hard. He had to sort it all out, put together the pieces. One fact stood out, unmistakably clear. *Laurie did have the key when she left him.* And, Roberts had found it—or claimed to have found it—in his car.

In the car where it must have fallen when Laurie's small purse had been opened in the struggle.

It was Roberts then, not Al, who had met Laurie that night and taken her out to Lovers Cliff. Her quick smile, and flirtatious ways, had led him on—letting him expect more than she was willing to give. He had made advances . . . and she had struggled with him. She had probably screamed, and he had panicked. He probably hadn't meant to kill her.

Afterwards, maybe even the next day, Roberts had found the key in the car and jumped to the conclusion that Gordon had left it there. In a natural, innocent way he had tripped himself up!

The blue convertible gleamed and mirrored back the rosy lights that came through the high-up windows. The skaters waltz, slow and dreamy, floated out to him.

Gordon thought of Al, of how he had told the truth in claiming he had met some of his buddies that night, and gone to the rumble. In the ensuing gang battle he had gotten the scratches.

At once, Gordon knew what it was that had not fitted together that sleepness night out in his front yard. Laurie would never have allowed Al to drive her all the way to Lovers Cliff against her wishes. He knew Laurie's toughness, her spirit. She would have rammed the car into a tree—or something worse—long before they got that far.

She had gone there voluntarily, with someone she liked.

In a daze, Gordon walked over to the convertible. Laurie loved to ride in it. That was part of her attraction for Roberts, he supposed—the flashy car and his position as owner of the arena. How glamorous it had all seemed to him, too—the authoritative clicking of his heels on tile as he opened up the doors each day, having his name in big letters on the office door, kids calling out to him as they came to skate.

Roberts! He was a pathetic middle aged man, trying to be young again.

Gordon reached his long, slim fingers along the base of the front seat, hoping desperately not to find —yet finding—something deep in the crevices. He stood and looked down at the small, telltale object. It was a tiny good luck charm. A four leaf clover with the remnant of a broken chain.

"Hi, Gordon," yelled Hazel Walters, strolling by with her skates over her shoulder. "What you doing out here?"

"Getting some air."

"Gosh," she said, seating herself on the ground near him. "You got 'bout the best job there is. I wish I was you."

"Yeah?" He clutched the clover charm tight in his hand. "Run on home, now. It's late."

"You're real nice," she sighed. "Mr. Roberts—he's nice too."

Yeah, thought Gordon, soberly. *He is nice. He's been the only father I've ever known. He's the only guy who's ever given me half a chance.* Dimly, he could hear Red's taunting, sarcastic voice—'Just because the guy gave him a job, he thinks he's wearing a halo. I'll bet if he had anything to do with it, the kid here would cover up for him. His own father just don't rate with him, but Roberts—'

"I could too," he said, softly to himself. "I'm the only one who knows."

"What'd you say?" asked the child.

"I didn't say a thing!" he yelled at her. "Go on home, you hear? Or don't you have a home to go to!"

He watched Hazel walk away, slowly, the battered shoe-skates slung over her skinny shoulders. Before she turned away, he'd seen the hurt look in her eyes. Then he thought of the kids who came here —some of them nobody's children, like Hazel Walters, with her sad, underfed face, some of them pretty and bubbly like Laurie Craig. He shivered, realizing as he had not realized before, that Laurie would never smile and be pretty again in this world.

Straightening his shoulders, Gordon walked slowly back inside the arena. Weaving his way carefully through the sideline skaters and beginners, he returned to the office. He opened the door and went inside.

He sat down at Roberts' big desk and reached for the telephone. Outside the door he heard, as though in a dream, the organ's deep-throated throbbing, the whir of skates on the wooden floor and an occasional shriek of laughter.

He swallowed hard and thought —needing desperately to think of something—how crazy the numbers on a telephone dial and the face of Sergeant Malloy ran together when you saw them through a mist.

The Man Nobody Could Touch

"The Law never really drags its feet," King said. "We get both the big operators and the hired killers in the end." I wanted to believe him. But when your best friend has been murdered—

by NORMAN STRUBER

THERE WERE THREE bullet holes in his head, and he'd taken a cruel beating before they'd killed him and dumped his body in the river. I'd have had trouble recognizing his bruised and swollen face if I hadn't known him so well. My partner, Jerry Ross—six-foot-two, blond, twenty-eight years, single, former All-American backfield. Ex-swell guy.

I layed the white sheet back over his face and nodded at the attendant. He chewed his gum dispassionately and slid the body back into the vault. I watched the long file drawer click shut, and I felt the sickening knot, hard in my stomach; revenge impulses, dark and ugly, filling my brain.

"Tough break, Foreman," the wide, squat man beside me said quietly. I was barely aware of his husky voice, even if his name *was* Walter King, Lieutenant attached to Central Homicide.

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FORMAN &
PRIVATE INVEST
MAIL

I stood there staring vacantly at the file drawer, the cold yellow identification card, resenting the way they'd spelled his first name wrong. I knew some boneheaded clerk had copied it wrong from Jerry's wallet I.D., and it made me mad. In the eyes of the city, Jerry was nothing but a statistic now. A dead statistic, another stiff that had to be labeled and filed. Another corpse, another yellow card, a little typo error—so what? It happens eighty times a year!

"Any ideas, Foreman?'

I looked at King, and maybe I was making him partly to blame. "Yeah. Get somebody on the payroll who can read. Jerry spelled his name with a J."

"Easy, boy, no sense flipping your goose at me. I'll have it corrected." He tipped his hat back on his clipped gray head. "Well, what about it?"

"Morey Garson," I said.

The corners of his mouth pulled back. "You'll have to get more specific than that, Foreman. You know Garson's too big a man to carry a gun."

I said angrily, "He doesn't carry a sign that says VICE LORD, either. A body dragged out of the river, beaten and bullet-riddled—who else would you say could be behind it? Who else gave the orders?"

"You know damn well we've been trying to prove he gives the orders for years. So don't go off on any spiels about who's behind every rotten deal in this town."

"So when the hell *are* you guys going to do something about Garson and his bunch?"

"In due time," King said meaningfully. "The law moves slow but sure."

"I can tell you how to get rid of them a lot faster. You take a machine gun, see, and . . ."

"The law doesn't work that way. Neither do the police."

"Cheers for Wyatt Earp."

"Don't get funny, Foreman. You're supposed to live by the law as much as we do. Were not supposed to be a bunch of trigger-happy punks like the guys we're trying to clean out. We live by the law and we *use* the law, and don't let the slow process fool you. We get there, we get both the big operators and the hired killers. Don't kid yourself. When you get right down to it, guys like Garson know it, too. They know it and they're plenty scared, only they have to be good actors. They tremble in private—until we lower the boom. Then they start busting apart like a rotten sack of potatoes."

"What were you saying about no spiels?"

"All right, that was just to set you straight, in case you forgot your license is a privilege to practise a form of law—not a duck-hunting permit. Now, what about it? You want to start at the beginning?"

"I'll send you a letter," I said.

"Look, Foreman—"

"I've been working on a full report for you. I'll finish it up and mail it to you."

"If you've got something material, I don't want to waste time."

"Neither do I." I started to leave and his stubby hand reached out and gripped my arm.

"I could hold you," he said darkly.

"That you could," I told him, unwinding his fingers from my arm. "You could also go to the trouble of blowing up my safe to get an unfinished report. And I've been saving all the spice for the last chapter."

Evidently, he wasn't interested in making me sweat—just yet—because he forced his face to warm up a little and began smoothing my rumpled jacket sleeve. "Now look, Jim, there's no reason for us to be at each other's throats."

"Then you might start by pulling in your fangs . . . *Walter?*"

Bushy brows came down, his eyes narrowing at me. "I want that report tomorrow at the latest. Just make sure you don't leave anything out of it." He paused. "Including the name of your client."

"The client hasn't anything to do with this."

"But he *has* got something to do with Garson, right?"

"End of third degree," I said bitterly, and started for the corridor to the street.

"And don't get any heroic ideas about Garson," he called after me. "We can't protect a hothead looking for trou . . ."

I didn't hear the rest because I was already through the heavy swinging door.

II

I WALKED OUT of the morgue that afternoon in a bit of a daze, not seeing much of the busy street or the sunshine, because I was still wrestling with the thought that I was responsible for Jerry's death. I was the one who'd insisted we take on the case. Jerry would still be alive if I'd listened to him, and we'd passed up this client who had only half the fee we'd asked.

It wasn't that Jerry was cynically money-grabbing or unsympathetic. It was just that we'd been hung up a dozen or more times because of the poverty plea, and you can't eat sympathy. Jerry was right; you had to draw the line somewhere. We ran a business, he'd said, and in business there were certain hard, inescapable facts. You had to make a profit, for one thing—and neither of us had been born with a silver navel.

Ordinarily, I would have gone along with him, but something inside me wouldn't let me turn away this client. Crazy, maybe. Crazy because now Jerry was dead. Crazy because the bulk of what I had for a brain was beginning to

grind out plans for friend Garson. The man nobody could touch.

Wrapped in my thoughts, I was barely aware that I had walked the ten or twelve blocks uptown to the old office building where Jerry and I were listed in the wall directory. The decrepit self-service elevator bumped along to the fifth floor, and came to a jarring halt, the door gliding open. I took out my key as I walked the length of the corridor to our office door. The lettering on it said: FOREMAN & ROSS—*Private Investigations*.

I was surprised at how dingy it looked to me now—the peeling gold leaf, the grimy frosted door, the scarred wood. My hand with the key hung in mid-air. The door was slightly ajar. I went in.

The place looked like a box of odd contents that had rolled a long way downhill—a first class mess. Papers were strewn all over the floor, file drawers hung open, the desk drawers had been yanked out, and last, but not least, the door of the floor safe was no longer held in place by its combination. The surprise would have been more complete if I'd had to wonder about what had caused the damage.

The damage had actually been done by a big, hard-eyed gorilla.

The gorilla's name was Big Veto Carillo, and he stood right there in the middle of the mess staring at me. A day earlier his steady gaze would have scared me. Jerry and I weren't the ones to try stopping a ten-ton steam roller—like Garson's set-up.

We knew our limitations. We had an uncontrollable urge to go on living, and we'd made an effort to stay clear of Garson and his boys. We'd even dropped a few cases just because we got the word it was annoying somebody. The 'word' had always been delivered by Big Veto, the Garson Squad's chief gorilla.

Suddenly, I was immune to gorillas. "Hello, Veto," I said.

"Hiya, Mr. Nosey."

He grinned and showed several gold teeth that he must have polished twice a day, and the scornful look in his eyes confirmed the fact that a dumpy little office safe was still a pushover for his beefy, experienced fingers. I looked at what was on the floor in front of the safe, and it was easy to spot what was missing because I knew what I was hunting. The large manila envelope was gone, the one containing the finished and signed report I'd lied to Lieutenant King about. The one that was sealed and stamped and addressed to Walter King, but wouldn't be delivered to him at police headquarters until my client was safely out of the country.

"Where is she, Mr. Nosey?" Veto wanted to know.

"Where's who?"

"Don't go stupid on me, peeper. Maria Valdez. Luis' big sister. And

don't tell me you haven't got her hidden somewhere."

He was right, there was no sense playing dumb after what had happened. They'd probably found out all they needed to know from Jerry—the reason for the beating. And then there was the report, and if they'd had any doubt about the connection between Luis and Maria beforeVeto cracked the safe, it was all erased now.

I wondered if they'd already decided to run me through the mimeograph—the head full of holes and then the river. The picture of Jerry on a slab lay exposed in a corner of my mind, and it made me want to take Veto apart despite all the urgings of caution.

"Talk, Mr. Nosey. Where is she?"

"Where you won't find her." I was a little surprised at the conviction in my voice. Ordinarily, I'd have been talking a blue streak, anything to get Big Veto off my back.

He grinned some more, a big, confident, gold-toothed gorilla. "So you *have* got her, huh? Imagine, a couple of phoney dicks like you and Ross trying to outsmart Morey Garson."

"Jerry," I heard myself say. I gazed at the gold teeth. "Were you in on that party, Veto?"

The grin faded, and the look in his eyes told me more than a hundred words.

"Come on, where is she?" he demanded, moving a step closer to me.

I stared at him, my jaw muscles working.

"Talk, and Morey might leave you half of this two-bit partnership," he went on warningly. "Play it stupid and . . ." He let the rest trail off without any need for second guessing about the alternative.

I smiled crookedly, and the rest of the grin closed over the glittering yellow in his ugly face, his broad, pocked forehead creasing in bewilderment. The way he saw it, I was supposed to start quaking like a Holy Roller. I ought to be breaking out in cold sweat and backing off and saying complimentary things about Morey Garson—how I sure didn't want to make trouble for the big man. I'd taken a case that led me smack into Garson's private business, and that was deadly.

"Something funny?" he asked.

"Ever hear of 'Go For Broke,' Veto?"

"Huh?"

"An old Marine term we used in Korea. We'd scream it at the enemy when we were out for blood."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It means you've swallowed the paralyzing fear and you're letting the enemy know about it. You're out to get him and smash him and you won't be stopped. You've seen too many of

your buddies get it, and you're out for red hot revenge."

"Go for broke?" He scowled, puzzled. He didn't seem to understand.

"You don't say it right, Veto. You shout it, *Go For Broke!*"

I hit him.

I threw my right fist and caught him flush in the mouth. He staggered into my desk, and grabbed hold of it for support, sagging a little backwards. I was nearly as surprised as he was because he was a good head over my five-eleven and built like a Sherman tank.

He swayed dumbly for a moment, running his tongue over his bleeding lips, his eyes glazed. Then he charged straight at me with a garbled animal sound in his throat and a killer look in his eyes.

I didn't budge. I planted my feet solidly and ducked under his wide swing. I came up inside with my first ramming into his onrushing belly. It wrenched an agonized grunt from him. He jack-knifed beautifully, and when his face came down my knee was on its way up to meet it. He flipped over on his back heavily, and stayed there.

His gun had fallen out and I kicked it across the room, even though at the moment he wasn't much interested in anything but filling his lungs with air.

That does it, I thought. Even if Big Veto had meant what he'd said before about laying off if I talked freely there wasn't a ghost of a chance now. Maybe my chances had chalked up a big fat zero the day Maria had walked through that grimy door. But I was grinning now anyhow. I stood there breathing hard with the excitement rampant inside me, and I was grinning down at that bloody, smashed face. Incredible as it seemed, I'd just taken Big Veto Carillo!

I yanked his jacket open without bothering with the button and found the manila envelope folded in half in his inside pocket. It was on the opposite side from his underarm gun caddy. It was a very special hunk of leather with a clever little niche for a razor-edged knife. A pearl-handled, taper-blade job—actually a small version of a medieval dagger.

I took the knife, and with my other hand I grabbed his tie and jerked his head erect, and just for a second I wished I had Big Veto's ruthlessness. I held the mean-looking blade under his chin and watched his eyes pop out of his skull. I drew the knife up quick and he gasped like it was his last breath. His head flopped back and he gawked, as I took the piece of his tie I'd severed just under the knot and pinned it with the knife to the front of my desk, right next to his head. Then I stood and examined the envelope.

It had been neatly slit open.

The pages were a little out of numerical order, but they were all there. Big Veto started to sit up groggily while I re-sealed the envelope with Scotch tape. I grabbed him by the stub of his tie and helped him to rise. It was a pleasure setting him up for a left hook. He went to sleep this time.

III

I GOT MY CAR out of the parking lot and dropped off the envelope at a messenger service on my way across town. The plans I had for Garson had just been pushed ahead of schedule, and there was no sense keeping Lieutenant King in the dark any longer. Complete candor now wasn't going to do *me* any good. But at least King would know what Garson knew.

Outside my apartment, I pressed the button in the door jamb, counting ten buzzes—five long, five short. I waited, hoping she'd obeyed my strict orders not to leave the apartment.

I sighed in relief when I heard her voice, close to the other side of the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's Jim," I said. I was glad that she had been careful enough to double-check.

The lock clicked and then the chain was removed, and when the door swung back I almost forgot everything for a moment. She seemed to grow lovelier by the hour, and I would have been ready to swear it, her face a smooth oval, lightly olive-skinned, with full red lips, short straight nose, and big dark eyes in sensuous features. She wore a sleeveless knit pullover that was as black as her long glowing hair, rising firmly in front with the arch of her full breasts. The tight red skirt matched the color of her mouth and molded the sleek lines of classic hip and thigh.

She waited until I was inside before she asked the question I dreaded answering in the way it would have to be answered to save her unnecessary pain.

"You have found Luis?" Her voice was soft and very feminine, and it had a slight Spanish accent.

I nodded. I'd known last night when Jerry phoned me from a small town upstate. He'd followed my lead on an unidentified body of a young Porto Rican found in a roadside ditch. There were seven bullet holes in the youth. It was the last piece in the puzzle concerning the whereabouts of twenty-year-old Luis Valdez—the puzzle that Maria had hired us to solve.

I'd been afraid to take it straight to the law with all I knew about it, because I was sure that the law would take it straight to Morey Garson, and they'd never prove a damn thing—as usual. Only Maria's name would come up and Garson would see to it she never

became a witness in a court of law. Luis Valdez' anonymity was important to Garson, and he'd go to any lengths to keep the truth from coming to light. Because Garson had sprung his biggest caper yet.

"Jim?" Her accent made it sound like *Jeem.*

There was no longer any need to hold out on her. "He's dead, Maria. I'm sorry." I did my best to soften the sordid details. She took it better than I had expected she would.

The lovely features sagged and tears welled up in her eyes. She swayed a little, her fingers tightening on my arm. "Jim . . . oh, Jim, why? Who would want to kill Luis?"

It was complicated for her because she had been in the States two weeks and knew nothing about Garson and his doings. Her sole purpose in coming had been to find her younger brother—a younger brother who had flown to the land of plenty to make his fortune like thousands of his fellow countrymen before him. Her parents had received only one letter from Luis shortly after his arrival two months before. Seriously worried, they had gathered their savings and sent Maria to look for him in the big legendary city of mystery and opportunity.

I guided her gently to the couch, and sat down on a chair facing her. I began with a brief rundown on Garson and his grip on the city. I told her about Councilman Beckett of the recently organized city Crime Investigation Committee, and his all-out effort to nail the vice lord. It was Beckett who had quickly become the mainstay of the Committee. It was Beckett who had the guts and the energy to lead the clean-up crusade, with the dubious support of a spineless mayor. It was Beckett who could drive the spear of the law direct to the heart of Garson's empire. It was Beckett who'd been gunned down outside his home two weeks ago.

"Luis was the assassin," I told her.

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, clenching her small fists.

"Madre Dios!" she whispered to no one, her throat strained with the hurt of it. *Why,* Luis?—why did you do this?"

"For money, Maria. Probably a lot of money—to Luis."

She moved her head slowly from side to side, tears filling the dark eyes again. She fought to keep her voice level. "Luis was always the wild one. He was always so dissatisfied . . . sometimes so cruel to my mother and father. They are wonderful people. They did not deserve this. They loved him . . . they always forgave him." Her eyes lifted to my face. "Why, Jim? Why?"

"I don't know, Maria. It just happens that way sometimes. Only

the head-doctors can answer it."

She held my gaze. "But what about this big man this . . . this Garson? How did Luis know how to go about—how do you say it?—contacting him?"

"It was the other way around, Maria. It was Garson's boy who got in touch with Luis. Garson wanted an unknown who wasn't afraid to kill—someone who didn't have a police record and would do anything for quick money. His boys have contacts who can supply them with names and locations of anyone meeting the requirements of the particular job they have in mind.

"They paid Luis to do the job, and then took him for a ride, probably with the excuse that they were going to hide him out. That made Beckett's murder second-removed, and by a stranger to the police as well, leaving them hardly a hair to go on. The police would have a tough time identifying Luis' body, let alone linking him with Garson."

She dried the tears with a frilly white handkerchief. "Then that is why you wanted me to stay here last night. You would not tell me anything, except that you didn't want me to stay in a cheap hotel." She had the picture now. "This Garson. He is looking for me, isn't he?"

I didn't pull any punches. "He wouldn't like it if the police got to you. You could make a positive identification of Luis' body, which is still being held at the Hooke County Morgue. With you out of the way, Luis would be nobody for a long time. Long enough for Garson to cover his tracks."

She glanced down at her hands, then looked up again with a small, grateful smile. "Thank you, Jim. Thank you for protecting me."

I frowned. "Jerry's the one you should thank. Only he's dead, too."

Her mouth fell open. "Oh . . . oh, no, Jim."

"Jerry was asking questions in the neighborhood where your brother lived. We weren't sure then just what it would lead to. But evidently it was a hot subject and Garson was tipped off that someone was very curious about Luis. I sent Jerry upstate to look at the body of an unidentified Porto Rican kid. It was a tragic mistake. He got back to the city all right. But he was killed sometime after he phoned me that the body was definitely Luis.

"From what Jerry found out, we knew that Luis had been contacted by Garson's boys for a special job two days before Councilman Beckett was killed. Knowing how Garson operates, the rest of the pieces fit. The police would figure it the same way, if they knew where to look."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Jim." She looked past me. "If it wasn't for me your friend—"

"You're not to blame. Garson is."

"What shall I do? I can't stay in your apartment forever."

I remembered the way she had looked the night before when we'd had coffee together, before I'd bedded down on the couch and she had taken the bedroom. I hadn't thought that a woman whose body was completely draped in five-sizes-too-big men's pajamas and bathrobe, could look so damned desirable.

"Would that be so hard to take?" I asked.

Crimson suddenly tinted her cheeks. "That . . . that is not the way I meant it, Jim. I . . ."

I cursed myself for a romantic fool. "But you're going home," I said abruptly. "Home, where you belong. Get packed."

"My suitcase is ready, Jim. But you know I haven't money for the airline ticket."

"Yes, you do."

"But no, I only have . . ."

"I'm refunding your money. We didn't deliver your brother alive."

"But you made no guarantee."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? It's one of our policies."

She pushed herself off the couch and came rushing to me, wrapping her arms around my neck, kissing my face a dozen times, placing her lips close to my ear. "You know I want to stay here with you. Please, don't try to fool me, Jim."

I gently pulled her arms from around my neck and eyed her squarely. "All right, I won't try to fool you. You're not safe here. Not anywhere in this city. You've got to disappear, and home is the best place for you to go."

"You will not come to the Island with me?"

"No."

"Then you do not love me?"

"I've got other plans."

"And . . . and I do not fit in with these plans?"

"No, Maria. You do not fit in with these plans." I glanced at my wristwatch. "There's a six o'clock plane to San Juan. We've got time if we hurry."

I left her standing there and got her suitcase from the bedroom. She didn't say anything as I picked up her handbag from the couch, thrust it in her hands and wheeled her by the elbow toward the door.

I didn't recognize the two hoodlums standing outside the door, but it didn't matter. The .38 with the silencer one of them held in his fist did all the talking. I barely caught sight of the orange flame it spewed and heard the sharp whisper, all mixed up with the sudden pain that punched into my side as I shoved Maria out of the way.

I felt myself spun around by the impact of the slug, and then I was reeling back into the room. Maria's scream was muffled, distant and unreal. A fuzzy hardness pounded my face, and strangely, I felt grateful for the carpet on the floor

that absorbed some of the blow. I tried pushing myself up, but it didn't work. Nothing worked, not even my brain, and then the blackness closed in on me and I couldn't hold it back.

IV

THE LIGHT WAS dim when I opened my eyes, and finally managed to prop myself up on one elbow. I saw the dark stain next to me on the carpet, and after a moment the throb in my side began to make sense. I got to my feet expecting a lot more pain than there was, snapped on the light and made my way to the bathroom. I stuck my head under a cold shower and it cleared fast.

With my jacket off, I eased my shirt out of my trousers and looked in the mirror. The slug had passed clean through the roll of flesh just above the hip, without tearing the flesh on its way out. A .45 would have taken half my side away. The blood had caked and stopped flowing, so I left well enough alone.

I got the jacket back on, pulled the Colt Cobra .38 Special from my back pocket and checked it. Then I headed for the front door, cursing myself for having been so slow about getting Maria out of the apartment.

I should have figured Big Veto would have had cronies waiting for him outside my office. They could have waited for me to reach the street and then followed me to my apartment, figuring the first thing I'd do would be to contact Maria. I hadn't been very bright.

I tried to console myself with the thought that in a life and death struggle any wrong move is a stupid one. It didn't console me much because Maria kept popping into it. I stopped crying on my shoulder and ran downstairs to my car. Wherever they took her, whatever they did to her, one man would know.

Morey Garson.

His house was east of town, deep in the exclusive wooded section of the peninsular. He had a big colonial-style mansion with enough manicured land around it to start his own county. It was dark now and there were lights burning, and there were four big cars lined up in the parking area.

Time was skittering away on Maria, so I chucked the elaborate plans and barged right up the driveway, not giving a damn about the hole I dug in Garson's pretty bluestone overlay as I slammed on the brakes in front of the flagstone walk. I yanked the gun out of my pocket and started up the walk. The portico was dark, and I didn't see the hulk there until he stepped right up in front of me.

"You got an appointment?" He spoke calmly, but there was a harsh rasp to his voice.

He was close enough for me to

smell his garlic breath, but it was too dark for him to see my hand until it was whipping through the air. The gun muzzle caught him over the temple, and his mouth only had time to open over a low groan. I caught him under the shoulders as he sagged, and eased him quietly to the porch.

I kept the gun in my fist and tried the front door. It wasn't locked. I pushed it open slowly and stepped inside. The foyer was dimly-lighted by the spread of light from another room. I crept along the hall to the lighted doorway and peered into a paneled room where nobody was.

"Hey, Jojo," a big voice shouted from another part of the house, "somebody came in the front door!"

I recognized it. Morey Garson's voice.

"Jojo, where the hell. . . !"

"Okay, boss, I'll check it."

Jojo was coming up the hall. I backed away toward a large darkened room, feeling the drapes framing the entrance brush over my cocked gun arm. I expected to see Jojo any second, but I didn't get to see anything but the brilliant, blinding light that jolted through my skull and shook me clear down to my toes. The light exploded into pain, and kept flashing like fading lightning, and then I wanted to curse the goddamn blackness that came billowing in again, curse Garson, curse Big Veto, curse Jojo, curse the whole stinking mess . . .

I didn't go out all the way, because I felt myself being lifted roughly and carried, and there was the splitting ache in my head overshadowing the dull throb in my side. I was vaguely aware of being dragged downstairs somewhere, the thumping of steps against my sagging back, my hands and feet caught in a powerful double grasp.

Then they dumped me, and this time there wasn't any soft carpet to cushion my face. My jaw and mouth took the brunt and I tasted blood, mixed with the surface grit of cold and damp concrete. I heard a garbled sound which gradually began to shape into human voices.

"How stupid can you get? Only a punk with a screw loose somewhere would come barging in here like that. Crazy, that's what."

"Yeah, crazy like a fox. You dumb ugly son, how the hell did he get in here? A bullet is breathing down my neck and you're in the kitchen reading the funnies. I ought to break your neck."

"Sorry, Boss . . ."

"And you, Grizzard. I thought you said he was taken care of."

"Well, that's what I was told, Boss. I only . . ."

"You only . . . you only! What the hell am I paying you guys for?"

"Geez, Boss . . ."

"Shut up. See if you can wake him up."

I was turned over. Niagara Falls hit me in the face, smothering me with a million tons of water. I gagged and choked and opened my eyes.

"As long as you're still around, Foreman, you can tell us where that report is."

Four heads ringed the bare lightbulb a few miles up, their bodies looking six or seven times life size. Morey Garson, tall, neat, gray-templed, looked more like a Man Of Distinction than the biggest hoodlum to hit town since Prohibition. Big Veto was there too—big as ten Sherman tanks now, his battered face a mass of bandages. There was a third guy with a fat cigar sticking out of his pudgy face—and a fourth, dark-skinned with a thin black mustache.

I winced at the pain rocketing through my skull, and fought the sickness that was making my stomach turn over. But the sickest part of it had nothing to do with the pain.

Go For Broke, I thought weakly.

Go For Zero.

I'd goofed it up miserably. Me, and my big plans.

All the thoughts of avenging Jerry, not letting his death go for nothing. All the firmly decided on plans for doing the city a big favor by blasting Garson right into hell —they were the things you only saw in the movies. I was staring at what had made my flop so complete.

Maria lay a few feet away, bound hand and foot, her shoulders exposed by the torn pullover, the red skirt hiked up high on her bare thighs. Her face was bruised, and the dark eyes watched me, wide and frightened.

"Where's that statement you made to the cops?" Garson said again.

"Have . . . haven't got it. Neither has she." It wasn't much of a voice that came out of me.

"You're lying, Foreman."

I shook my head.

"Let me have him, Boss," Big Veto said. "I'll make him talk. I owe him something."

"Later." Garson glanced significantly at Maria. "She'll talk faster. Get back to it."

A triumphant grin spread the bandages on Big Veto's face. He squatted in front of Maria and wrapped his thick hand in her hair, jerking her erect. She screamed and I felt my muscles tightening, my mouth going dry.

"You vicious punk!" I choked.

The pudgy man with the cigar saw me sit up, and a gun suddenly appeared in his hand. I got my knees under me and tried standing on wobbly legs. But I didn't have the strength for it.

My eyes focused more sharply when Big Veto laughed and

slapped Maria's face, spinning her head sharply to one side. She stopped screaming. She must have realized that by crying out she was only making Veto more sadistically vicious.

"That's more like it." Garson took a long cigarette from a thin, gold cigarette case, and the dark one lighted it for him. "Now, where's that report?"

Maria talked, fast. She said a lot of things and it was a shame I couldn't understand Spanish because it sounded good. She spat it out vehemently without a trace of the innocent look, and it was even a bigger shame that Garson didn't seem to understand, either.

Garson scowled at the dark one. "What's she saying?"

The dark face flushed. "Nothing nice, Boss."

I looked at Maria. "I'm sorry, kid."

She managed a little smile. "Not . . . not your fault, Jim."

I knew it was, though. I should have been more careful about shaking a possible tail on my way to the apartment. I could even have phoned her and arranged a safer meeting place. To take it back further: I should have put her on a plane right after I'd heard from Jerry. From that instant on her life had been in danger.

Big Veto had the pearl-handled dagger in his hand now, and was grinning widely as he ran his finger over the blade.

"Wait!" I shouted. "She doesn't know about the report!"

Veto turned, and other eyes fastened on me.

"I put it in the mailbox," I told them.

"Where?" Garson asked, his tone incredulous.

"The box in the lobby of my office building." I hoped the other two guys couldn't make a liar out of me.

"You're stalling, Foreman. You wanted the girl to mail it from Porto Rico. Veto said it had a Spanish label on it." He glanced for confirmation at the dark one.

"*Si. Par Avion* . . . that's for international airmail."

"That's what I intended at first," I said quickly. "But after Veto showed up at my office, I changed my mind. Veto would only have to make a call and you'd know all about it. I figured my chances would be better if I brought the law in sooner."

"So you just dropped it in the mailbox, huh?"

"That's right. Look, you can check it easy enough. The envelope's still in the mailbox. The schedule on the box says the last daytime pickup is at four o'clock. The next pickup is at eleven. It was close to five when I mailed the report."

Garson hiked his brows. "How do I know you didn't duplicate that report? Maybe you've got it hidden somewhere."

V

I DIDN'T HAVE much hope for permanently altering the final outcome for Maria and myself. But talking takes time, and when time's running out in the most dangerous possible way you cling to whatever's left. I kept talking.

"We used the secretarial service on the first floor for all our typing. This report I wanted private. I didn't want some ambitious typist mailing you a copy. Veto must have told you that the report's in longhand. I knew I could always duplicate it afterwards, if I needed it." That part was true, and it was just possible Garson believed it.

He barked an order for Veto to make a phone call, and evidently this part of the basement had been used before as something more than a wine cellar, because the big man removed some bottles from one of the shelves and began dialing. Big Veto told someone on the other end of the line about the manila envelope—where it was, and how much trouble he'd be in if he wasted any time getting it.

The fact that a mailbox is U.S. Government property didn't seem to bother anyone. At the moment, it didn't bother me. What did bother me was wondering just how much time I'd really gained for Maria and myself. I didn't have to wonder for long.

Big Veto was staring at me, his hand toying with the knife. "Even if we get the report, boss, this guy's going to go spilling everything to the cops."

"Naturally," Garson agreed.

I'd known it had to come sooner or later. But that didn't stop my heart from skipping a beat.

"Let me take care of him now, boss." Veto said eagerly.

Garson eyed me coolly over his cigarette. "You should have come to me first with what you knew. We could have made a deal."

I didn't say anything.

"Boss?" Big Veto was straining at the bit.

"Don't take too long about it," Garson said, as if it meant no more to him than getting a chicken ready for dinner. "Then take care of the girl."

Big Veto grinned and moved toward me, the knife held low in his right fist.

You've got nothing to lose. Part of your brain stops functioning, maybe the biggest part, and the little part that wants to keep you alive takes over.

I hadn't the slightest idea what I was going to do until it began happening.

The gleaming knife slashed up at my stomach and instinctively I jerked my body away, my hands thrusting at the blade. I felt it slice against my wrist, and then I had Veto's heavy wrist clamped in my fingers and I was falling backwards at the same time, pulling his heaving bulk with me.

The way my mind registered in that moment it seemed as though I was floating to the floor with Big Veto drifting down on top of me. I twisted the thick wrist with all my strength. It was touch and go for a moment, and then Veto's wrist finally gave in, with my hands covering the fist and imprisoning the knife, the blade turning and pointing at his chest.

A gun cracked and I felt violent shock slam into my shoulder. Then I hit bottom and Veto was an enormous weight on top of me, his scream clipped short as the knife sank in under his wishbone. I felt two slugs wallop Big Veto's body over me. Then I had the gun out of his holster and I was lining up the sights.

Pudgy face fired another slug into Veto's body and I aimed at the cigar still clenched in his teeth. I saw a little hole dot his forehead. I hit the dark one in the side as he tried to duck behind the edge of the wine rack, hit him again in the chest when he turned to fire his gun at me, and he slammed back into the wall and sank to the floor with a wheezing gasp.

Garson was running for the door now, but he wasn't as fast on his feet as he looked. I put a bullet in his back, and kept jerking the trigger even though I knew the gun was empty.

It was all over, but it took a while for it to sink in.

"Jim! Jim!"

I worked my way out from under Big Veto.

"Jim! Are you all right?"

I felt numb all over, and then, quite suddenly, I heard myself laughing. It was kind of a crazy sound. "I feel fine, Maria. Just fine."

I lay there next to Big Veo and I laughed good and hard, and then I stopped abruptly because I heard Morey Garson's crackling voice pleading from the door.

"Doctor . . . get . . . get me . . . doctor . . ."

It was Lieutenant King who got him the doctor, because he and about six others were pushing their way inside in the next moment. King got him a doctor—an assistant M.E. from the coroner's office. Also a couple of police photographers and a couple of ambulances.

"Look who was calling who Wyatt Earp," King said to me, while two docs were checking over Maria. "Not bad—two to the morgue, and two to the hospital."

"You got the report?" I said.

"With the blood on the envelope."

"It wasn't mine."

"It didn't matter. When you suddenly sent the report by special messenger I knew you were off on a flyer. The blood only made us move faster."

His eyes roved over me. "I gather the blood on your living room carpet was yours, though."

I grinned at him. "What the hell. It was *my* carpet."

He grinned back at me, shaking his head incredulously.

They kept me in the hospital a week, and Maria stayed at my apartment, and came to see me every day—except the last one. I wondered why she hadn't shown up, and then I figured she might be arranging a surprise welcome home, just for the two of us.

The apartment was empty when I got there. Not even a note—only the phone ringing. It was Lieutenant King.

"Thought you might be interested in knowing the whereabouts of one Maria Valdez. Her folks wired her money for a plane ticket. She's taking the six o'clock to San Juan . . . Pan American . . . tonight."

"Thanks, King."

"Don't mention it. Part of our 'Lonely Hearts' service." He hung up.

It wasn't hard to find her at the airport. You don't see many girls like her standing around a gate to the field. She looked pleasantly surprised when she saw me. Then suddenly she looked down and a flush crept up over her cheekbones.

"Going somewhere?" I smiled at her.

"Yes."

"Did you think I was going to let you go that easily?"

"But you once said that you had other plans."

"Not anymore." I placed my hand under her chin and gently lifted her face.

The dark eyes looked up at me. "You have made new plans?" she asked.

"I have made new plans."

"And . . . and I fit into these plans?"

"You fit in so beautifully that my bags are already on your plane." I bent over and kissed her upturned mouth. "They have justices of the peace in Porto Rico, I assume."

The big eyes lighted up like sun on a rainy day. "*Si* . . . *si*, Jim, we have many justice of the peace!" She came into my arms. "Oh, Jim, what pretty babies we will have!"

"You mean the ones with the red hair and black eyes."

"No . . . no," she bubbled with laughter. "I mean the ones with the black hair and red eyes."

I grinned, taking her arm and rushing her out to the waiting plane. "There's only one way to settle this," I said.

A New MIKE SHAYNE Novelet Next Month

THE THIRD FACE

Troy had no way of knowing that gambler's luck in a 'Frisco saloon would lead to violence at sea. But his playing stayed Ace-brilliant.

by THEODORE MATHIESON

JIM TROY complacently stacked three hundred dollars in bills on the green baize—winnings from the freezeout that had ended the evening's games and sent the players on their way—when he glanced up to find that he was not yet alone.

A man stood across the table from the gambler, gripping a small leather satchel with both hands and teetering apologetically.

"Would you play one more game, Mr. Troy. With me?"

Jim took his time looking the man up and down. He noted his sharp actor's features and obvious black toupe before replying and when he did speak, his manner was curt. "Why should I? You sat by all evening without playing a card, just watching. Now that the others have gone you want to play. Are you laboring under the illusion I may be too tired to think straight?"

"No, no, it's not that. I—" The man tightened his hold on the satchel and glanced anxiously towards the door. "I play better when I am—undistracted."

"I see."

Troy glanced at the clock behind the wood stove. Two thirty-five. He could hear faintly the clink of glasses from the saloon

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A JIM TROY NOVELET

downstairs, and the click of the roulette wheel. The room was pleasantly warm, and his bar chair comfortable, and the sight of the thick San Francisco fog pressing against the windows reminded him of this unwelcome walk to his hotel.

"All right, Mr.— You have the advantage of me."

The man hesitated and gave a furtive smile. "Brown. Caleb Brown."

Troy broke the seal on a new deck of cards, and started shuffling them.

"I watched you play very carefully, Mr. Troy," Brown said, patting his toupe like a vain woman. "I am convinced you are an honest gambler, and an amazingly skillful one. That's why I wish to pit my ability against yours."

Troy nodded amiably, his sharply-planed face taking on a faint predatory cast. It was true he was honest, so far as card strategy went, but he always kept to himself his curious ability to read the minds of most of his opponents while they concentrated upon their play. A trade secret was a trade secret.

The gambler's gray eyes grew thoughtful now, as he watched Caleb Brown open his satchel and take out a thick bundle of greenbacks.

"Cold hand and draw, Mr. Troy? And may I put five hundred in the pot?"

Troy hesitated, telling himself that Brown must be very sure of himself, or very much in a hurry to grab his winnings and run. Or had he guessed how the gambler operated—knew he could shield his mind from Troy's subtle peering. Well, it was worth equalizing the bet to find out.

"Five hundred."

Troy dealt the cards slowly, almost hypnotically, and then the drawing began. And as Brown fastened his attention upon his cards, Troy sent out his mental tentacles to grasp gently at his opponent's thoughts. A second later he withdrew them, shocked. Caleb Brown's thoughts were so filled with *fear* that Troy could not pick up anything else!

Troy laid down his hand with an air of finality. "Mr. Brown—" he began.

But before he could go on, the door swung open and three men entered. The first, dark and bearded and wearing a long, heavy overcoat, held a gun in his hand and walked swiftly to the card table. The other two, professional young toughs, remained standing at the door.

"Put your gun on the table, Caleb," the man ordered peremptorily.

Troy's gambling opponent laid a side-hammer Colt on the green baize, and the bearded man thrust it into his pocket.

"Stand up," he said.

"Now listen, Rollo," Caleb protested, his bottled-up fear flooding into his face, "it's true I dipped into the money. But if I lost, I could have replaced it from my own account."

"You're broke, Caleb, and you know it," the bigger man snapped. "Besides, you were told to hand that money over to Brickell tomorrow morning early—the minute he hit town! They heard me give the order—"He nodded at the toughs. Then the bearded man turned to Troy with a sneer.

"How was he doing?"

"Too early to tell," Troy said calmly.

"He'd have lost, for sure. But he can't stay out of a game."

"Why trust him with a bag of money, then?" Troy asked reasonably.

"Look here, Rollo," Caleb said, and Troy could see he was making a pathetic attempt at indignation in order to save himself. "You have no right to order me around this way. It's always been fifty-fifty between us!"

"Not when you're stealing my money!"

"Our money. And I've been against paying your man Brickell from the start! I just don't want any part in—"

Rollo fired his gun without moving his body, and Caleb jerked forward, supporting himself upon the card table as he looked across at Troy, working his mouth in an attempt to speak directly to the gambler.

"I wasn't going to pay a man," he cried in a shrill whisper, "to burn a ship—and drown all those people!"

Then he slid to his knees, overturning the card table. Greenbacks littered the floor, but nobody stooped to pick them up. Troy seized his derringer from his pocket, but the man with the beard had the advantage. His gun flashed, and his bullet hit Troy's left shoulder like the kick of a mule, smashing him against the wall, and the derringer went flying from his hand.

The next instant, the gambler rallied, seized the oil lamp from the wall bracket, and hurled it at the killer. The lamp struck the man full in the chest, shattering, and as he stood clicking an empty gun at Troy, a streak of yellow flame licked up his heavy overcoat. One of the toughs ran up behind Troy, and before the gambler had time to turn, he felt a stunning blow on the back of his head. As he fell forward, he heard shouts and the smell of singed hair, and then he passed out.

DIMLY JIM TROY was aware of creaking and the wash of water, and he knew he was on board a ship at sea, but more immediate was his pain and distress. He made an effort to move, and found himself constricted by a rough, oily fabric that was tucked around him

like a blanket. Air came freely to him from beyond his head, so he inched himself forward painfully until he emerged from what he judged was a tarpaulin cover, and sat shivering upon a damp and draughty deck.

He felt in his pockets for a match and found that all his possessions had been removed. He discovered two matches in a vest pocket, and lighting one of them, examined the shirt under his coat. It was drenched in his blood. Pain stabbed his shoulder and his head throbbed. He gritted his teeth and began swearing softly.

The match burned down, and just before it went out, he looked searchingly around him. He was in the hold of a sailing ship; boxes and bales were piled high around him, battened with stout boards and ropes, and he could smell the pungent odor of lumber over the fetid smell of the bilge. Ahead of him, he caught a glimpse of a steep ladder leading up to a closed trap, and then his match went out.

Suddenly he remembered the man Rollo, his overcoat burning, clicking an empty gun at him. Apparently his henchmen had succeeded in extinguishing the blaze. Otherwise, they might just as well have left Troy to burn in a big fire. Doubtless they thought they had killed him. Troy guessed they'd stowed him aboard the ship to keep his body from being discovered.

But wouldn't it have been found when the ship reached its destination?

Troy gasped as the answer came to him in its chilling finality. *This ship wouldn't get where it was going. It was doomed to be set on fire and lost at sea with all hands.*

The thought stirred Jim into action. He rose shakily and felt his way along in the dark to the ladder, climbing painfully until he reached the trap. But when he pushed, the great lid did not move. The ship rolled gently, and from outside he heard the strident mew of a gull which probably meant they were not far from land. After a while, Troy crept back down into the hold, and with his remaining match, discovered a short heavy billet which he carried back up to the trap.

Pain made connected thinking difficult, and the apprehension of time unreliable, but it seemed to Troy that he sat for many hours at his post before he heard the first sign of activity above, the clink of a winch closeby. He waited until the sound ceased, then he struck the trap sharply several times with the billet. But no one answered, nor did the sound of the winch come again.

Again an interminable wait, until Troy heard the sound of someone whistling *Dixie* directly above, and he renewed his tattoo. This time his signal was answered. There was the clink of a chain and the snap of a lock, and the trap

was thrown back to show a sober-faced young ship's officer holding a lantern, and looking into the black hold.

"I'm not a stowaway," Troy said. "I was shot and clubbed and thrown in here. Would you please take me to your captain?"

The officer appeared irresolute, then snapped his mouth closed with decision. "Aye, I will," he said gruffly, and helping Troy out of the hold, he replaced the trap at once and locked it. Then as the gambler swayed unsteadily on his feet, the officer hurried to his side and supported him.

"It's the late watch, and the master'll be asleep," he said. "I'm the first mate. You can rest in my cabin and see him first thing in the morning."

"No, I must see him now," Troy said thickly, his senses suddenly reeling. He felt himself being hurried along the deck and into a cabin, where, as he sank down upon a bunk, he lost consciousness again.

WHEN TROY AWOKE, he found his shoulder tightly dressed, and the strong smell of disinfectant in the cabin. The first mate, washing his hands at a basin, had a curiously impressive and at the same time ludicrous face, rising large and broad from the cheekbones up, and dwindling to practically no chin at all. When he saw Troy looking at him, he ducked his head in a friendly fashion and smiled.

"You were lucky," he said. "The bullet passed through the muscle and out again. You've lost quite a bit of blood, but I think you'll be all right."

Troy murmured his thanks and introduced himself. "What ship am I on?" he asked.

"The Sutherland, Captain John Paris, out of Frisco, bound for Portland. My name's Zugsmith. You feel all right now?"

Troy sat up and shook his head to get rid of the last cobwebs. "I've got to see the Captain," he said, with grim urgency.

"Are you up to walking to his cabin?"

Troy put his feet to the floor and tried to rise, but fell back again. "Maybe you'd better fetch him down here," Troy said, smiling ruefully.

The first mate's eyebrows shot up. "I couldn't ask him that. He's asleep. He'd have my scalp!"

"Tell him I think *The Sutherland* is going to be burned out from under him!"

Zugsmith whistled and looked hard at Troy. "All right. I'll tell him."

When the door closed behind the first mate, Troy got up shakily and went to the washstand, where he splashed his face in cold water. It helped to revive him, and he sat down in a chair feeling much refreshed.

There came a flutter of light knocks upon the cabin door.

"Rudy?" It was a woman's voice.

"Come in," Troy said.

She was small and buxom, in her late twenties, with dark handsome eyes and a full mobile mouth, and she wore her brown hair swept up into a full pompadour. When she saw Troy she gasped, and her face grew red in confusion of mingled pleasure and pain.

"Jim!" she whispered.

"Emma Osborn!"

She stood looking at him in puzzlement and something far deeper, then went quickly to his side. "What are you doing here—in Rudy's cabin?" she asked. "I didn't know you were even on the ship!"

"I didn't either until a few minutes ago. Zugsmith pulled me out of the hold and patched up a bullet wound. He a friend of yours?"

"Rudy and I are going to be married when the ship gets to Portland. In trouble again, Jim? Are you badly hurt?"

"I'm fine . . . I'm sure it will be a happy marriage."

Emma blinked, and a flush came into her cheek.

"I had to make up my mind between two men, Jim," she said with a forced gaiety. "One was very handsome, but he was too fond of himself. Rudy is gentle and considerate. I didn't make up my mind until the last moment, and came on board just before the ship sailed." She paused, and then her voice became unsteady. "What happened to you, Jim, after you left Sacramento?"

"I worked the river boats."

"I—missed you."

"I missed you, too," Troy said, embarrassed, and then was glad when the door opened and Zugsmith appeared with a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

"Emma!" he cried, his gaze darting in bewilderment from the woman to the gambler. "You know each other?"

"Her father was a friend of mine, in Bodie," Troy said shortly. "Let me congratulate you on being engaged to a fine girl."

"I know I'm lucky!" Rudy's eyes shone with such complete trust and devotion that Troy was momentarily disconcerted.

"Did you tell the captain I must see him?"

"I told him. He's angry and thinks you must be drunk or lying, but he's coming right down as soon as he's dressed."

As two bells sounded, the first mate pulled the cork from the half-full bottle of whiskey, and set it down on the table. He went to a cupboard and got three glasses, and on his return the ship rolled and he bumped the edge of the table. The bottle went spinning and crashed against the foot of the bunk.

Troy picked up an empty shard with a rueful face. "I was thirsty, too!"

"Never you mind," Rudy said

smiling. "I'll borrow a bottle from the second mate." And he left the cabin.

Whereupon Emma leaned over and kissed Troy full upon the lips, and he realized despairingly that troubles never come singly.

Five minutes later Zugsmith returned with a new bottle and the news that the captain had changed his mind. Troy was to be escorted or carried to his cabin.

"The old man's like a compass in a thunder storm—always changing his mind," Zugsmith complained. "You never know where you stand with him!'

They walked aft against a stiff wind from the south east, Troy feeling greatly revived by the whiskey. Overhead a bright full moon shone down, revealing a compact, three-master schooner with a broad beam that kept her steady in a fast-running sea. Troy noted particularly two life boats—one lashed upside down amidships, the other supported by davits from the starboard side.

In his cabin, Captain Paris stood behind his desk, a burly, florid faced man with pale blue eyes and an unruly shock of silver-white hair. He pointed an aggressive finger at Troy.

"What do you mean—my ship is about to be burned out from under me!" he shouted. "You make your story good, young man, or I'm likely to put you under lock and key!"

Troy told the whole story at once, and when he had finished, the captain sat scowling and pulling at his lower lip.

"According to what you say, the man called Rollo gave this Caleb Brown money to pay a man called Brickell to set a ship on fire. Why should it be this ship?"

"You would know better about that," Troy replied. "If you're carrying anything especially valuable."

The master pounded the desk with his first.

"And damn it, I am! What do you think of his story, Alverado?" The captain spoke unexpectedly into the shadows of the cabin, and a fourth man stirred and came into the lamp light. He was slender, fastidiously dressed, with a swarthy complexion that glowed with an oily sheen, and eyes like chocolate drops.

"He's telling the truth, all right. The insurance agency sent me on board because there's been a plague of robberies on coast-wise shipping. The operation has always been the same. The thief makes his getaway in one of the ship's boats, and is picked up later by a fishing smack.

"We've also learned that there's a couple behind the robberies—partners—who stay behind the scenes and hire the thieves. This man Rollo and Caleb Brown sound like they might be the masterminds, and Brickell sounds like

one of the hirelings. This is the first time I've heard of any plans to burn a ship!"

"Then Brickell is on board my ship, ready to set it afire!" the captain said in angry bewilderment. "Who can he be? One of the crew or one of the passengers?"

"I think we can determine that," Troy said quietly. "When did *The Sutherland* leave San Francisco?"

"At ten o'clock yesterday morning."

"Then around three the same morning I heard Rollo say Brown was to deliver the money to Brickell when Brickell got into town. Clearly, if Brickell came from out of town, he cannot be a permanent officer or member of the crew of *The Sutherland!*"

"There have been no recent replacements among either my officers or crew," the captain growled, "except for my second mate, Wergeland. And they were all on board for a twelve o'clock roll call the night before we sailed!"

"Then Mr. Brickell must be one of the passengers," Troy said.

"Who are they, Mr. Zugsmith?" the captain demanded.

Zugsmith cleared his throat in embarrassment. "Only three, sir. My fiancee, Emma—an elderly retired gentleman, Mr. Wharton—and Mr. Alverado."

"But I came on board to watch for just this sort of thing, and to guard the money," Alverado explained smoothly.

"Quiet, you fool!" the captain ranted. He was clearly out of his depth. "We'll find this Brickell, I tell you. We won't take any chances at all. Not even with you, Mr. Troy. You're a stowaway in my book, until you prove you aren't."

"But would I come and tell you if I had anything to conceal?"

"You yourself could be Brickell!" The captain waved his arms. "Mr. Zugsmith, put this man under lock and key. Then there'll be one less thing I have to worry about!"

FOR THE NEXT couple of days, Jim Troy spent his time alone, locked in a windowless storeroom off a corridor that led to the galley. Three times a day the cook would lay his meal in front of the door and hold a gun on him until he picked it up and went back inside. He was supplied with an oil lamp and a deck of cards, and upon a recent demand, a map of the Pacific coast with the route of *The Sutherland* marked in pencil by the captain himself.

Late in the evening as he played solitaire upon the top of a flour barrel, he heard a key turn in the lock, and Emma entered, her hair flying from a windy passage along the deck, her eyes wild.

She ran to him and flung her arms around him. "Oh, Jim," she whispered, "I would have come sonner, but Rudy wouldn't tell me where you were!"

"Where did you get the key?" Troy demanded, holding her off.

She lowered her eyes and reddened. "Rudy's asleep in his bunk. He never wakes up when he's had too much to drink."

"I see."

"Is it true, Jim, that someone on board wants to set the ship on fire?"

"It's true."

"You'll take care of me, won't you, Jim? You won't let anything happen?"

"Look here, you've got Rudy Zugsmith, remember? He's a good man and I know he loves you."

"I know it, too," she cried. "He's kind and good, but I don't feel really safe anywhere but in your arms, Jim!'

A creak sounded from the door, and before Troy could disengage Emma's arms, it swung open and Alverado stepped inside. He gave no indication that he had seen the embrace.

"I wanted to talk to you, Mr. Troy," he said.

Emma backed away in fear and embarrassment as Alverado sat down on a box opposite Troy.

"I was told you asked for a map of the coast from Captain Paris. The idea intrigued me. I believe you are what you say you are, Mr. Troy—an honest gambler—and a very shrewd man besides. Perhaps I would stand to gain by knowing exactly what you wanted with that map!"

Troy hesitated, then nodded and took the map from the shelf, and unfolded it upon the barrel between them.

"I was curious to know when this ship would pass nearest to the coast," Troy explained, "and where there might be ports and fishing boats available. In other words, I was trying to locate the point at which Brickell might plan to abandon the ship. It would give us some idea when to expect him to strike."

"Do you think he would strike anyway, even if he knew his plan had been discovered?"

"It depends on how much is at stake," Troy replied.

The agent smiled faintly and said: "In the captain's safe there is five hundred thousand dollars in gold to be deposited at the new Trans-Cascade bank at Portland."

"Then I don't think Brickell is going to give up."

"When do you think he'll move?"

Troy pointed at the map. "Where are we now?"

The agent pointed to a spot upon the sea well above the line between California and Oregon.

"Then Port Orford is the next place where fishing boats would be available," Troy said. "How long will it take us to get there?"

"We have the wind against us. We might not reach it until two o'clock tomorrow morning."

Troy did some quick figuring.

"If that were to be the spot—there are only a few on the whole coast, and this is the most unpopulated stretch of it—it wouldn't give us much time to find out who Brickell is. Not much more than four hours!"

"What could we do to stop him?"

Troy thought a moment. "Has the captain told the passengers or the crew about me?"

"No. I advised him against it. We want to avoid a panic at any cost."

"Then I'm going to go out on deck for a while."

"Jim, be careful!" Emma came forward and touched his arm, her eyes pleading.

"Leave the lock open here," Troy said quickly, "and go back to your cabin." He turned to the agent. "Have you any objections, Mr. Alverado?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Troy."

"In that case, you won't mind lending me this." And in a swift and unexpected movement, Troy leaned forward and drew a revolver from the holster beneath the open coat of the agent. It was a side hammer Colt, 36-caliber. "I won't use it unless I have to," Troy assured him.

But the agent looked very unhappy.

TROY STOPPED outside the cabin marked *Second. Mate.* A light showed through the louvers and Troy knocked gently, and then without waiting for a response, entered the cabin. The second mate lay stretched out on his bunk reading a letter, but half arose at Troy's appearance. He was a lank, hollow-cheeked man with the prominent nose and straight forehead of the Scandanavian.

"What is it you want?" he asked, his bloodshot eyes narrowing. "Who are you?"

"I am an insurance agent for coast-wise shipping," Troy ad libbed. "Captain Paris authorized me to ask some questions."

"He did, did he?" the mate asked, sitting up on the bunk. "What kind of questions?"

"You are a replacement on board *The Sutherland?"*

"That's right."

"And when did you first come aboard the ship?"

"The night before she sailed."

"Can you prove you were on board *all* that night?

The second mate shook his head "No, I can't. And I don't have to. Not to you, mister!" Wergeland's face darkened, and he rose from the bunk with clenched fists. "I think we'll just take you along to see the Cap'n—"

Troy brought out Alverado's gun and Wergeland stopped short.

"I know who you are!" the second mate rasped, hating Troy with his eyes. "The captain didn't tell the crew anything, but he told me. You're in trouble, mister, holding

up an authorized officer on board a ship."

"We're all in trouble if I don't find a man called Brickell." Troy picked up a small bottle at the foot of the bunk, removed the cap and sniffed at it. It held a dull-brown liquid.

"Knock-out drops," Troy said, his mood lightening. 'You shouldn't leave these lying around, but since you have—"

He took a glass from the medicine cabinet, and pouring a quarter glass of whiskey from a bottle that stood upon the table, he added a dash of the brown liquid. Troy held out the glass to the man.

"You'd better drink this," he said, tapping the glass insistently with the gun barrel.

It took nearly five minutes after the mate swallowed the drugged liquor before his head sank on his chest and he staggered back to his bunk. Troy pushed him down, listened a moment to his breathing, and then went quietly out on deck.

He walked forward alertly on the starboard side without meeting anyone. The ship rode a gentle swell, and far ahead to the northeast, beyond Port Orford, the light from Cape Blanco flashed periodically.

As Troy approached the passenger cabins, a door to one of them opened and Rudy Zugsmith stepped out on deck and confronted Troy.

"I was awake when Emma came back to return my keys," the first mate said with a kind of sad weariness.

"Well?"

Zugsmith shrugged. "Emma wants me to help you, so I'll do it."

"Good," Troy said, in relief. "I want to see that third passenger, Wharton."

"Come on." Zugsmith led the gambler to the last cabin forward. A light was on within; the mate knocked lightly but there was no answer. Troy stepped past him, and opened the door. The cabin was empty.

Over Zugsmith's protest, Troy reached under the bunk and seized Wharton's suitcase, opening it and dumping the contents upon the bunk. The gambler at once picked up a small packet wrapped in black, with white lettering upon it.

"Dynamite," he murmured. "It appears that we have found Mr. Brickell."

A second later he picked up a curious metal tool that looked like a screwdriver with notches cut into the tip.

Troy asked softly: "Where is the money kept—the big money?"

"Why—how did you know?"

"Alverado told me."

"I can't understand why he let you out."

"He would have had a hard time stopping me. Besides, perhaps he thought I might do some of his work for him. Now where is the money?"

"It's in a wall safe in the captain's cabin. But Mr. Troy, we can't—"

"Come on."

"Wait!" The urgency in the mate's voice froze Troy in the act of opening the door.

Zugsmith's face was red with embarrassment and indecision, and he swallowed twice before he finally spoke. "It's just this, Mr. Troy. I won't help you unless you make a promise."

"Well?"

"Emma means a lot to me. I think she likes you—more than is good for me, I mean. I ain't got much to offer, in looks, that is, but I got a steady job on this ship, and I love Emma, and I think I know what's best for her—a good steady husband and a home of her own. Are you prepared to offer her that?"

"No."

"Well, I am. And I wish—well, I'd rather not have you in the way."

Troy looked at the man. His plea would have been ludicrous if his love and sincerity hadn't been shining from his eyes like the rays from a warm fire.

"You don't have to worry about me," Troy said presently. "I won't see Emma again ever, after this trip."

"Then I'll do what I can to help you!"

Troy led the way aft, and when they reached the companionway that descended to the captain's cabin, Troy stopped and pointed to the seaman at the wheel, with his back to them.

"That's Olson," Zugsmith whispered. "He's deaf as a post!"

Unnoticed by the helmsman, Troy and the first mate opened the cabin doors and peered down the hatchway where a faint light glowed at the foot. Troy went down first, his gun drawn.

An elderly, bald-headed man knelt by the open safe upon the deck, taking out heavy bags from the receptacle. To the right, the captain sat in his chair, his head sunk forward upon his chest. There was blood upon his temple.

"Put your hands over your head, Brickell!" Troy said sharply.

The man at the safe turned suddenly, his seedy old face showing shocked surprise, a heavy bag of gold held motionless in his right hand. Troy repeated his order.

The man nodded placatingly, and put down the bag slowly, while raising his left hand. But the moment he had released the bag, he snatched a revolver off the floor and fired at Troy. The bullet smashed into the companionway arch and splinters flew in the gambler's face. Troy's own shot struck the safe robber squarely in the chest. He gave a little jump on his knees, and then fell forward on his face.

Zugsmith crossed quickly to the captain, and hovered over him for a few seconds. "He's alive," he

said. "He's had a blow on the head." Then he dampened a towel and applied it to the master's injury.

Troy stood in the center of the cabin meanwhile, shaking his head. "I don't understand this," he murmured. "I don't understand it at all."

Then he went back up the companionway and locked the doors and came down again. He stared down in perplexity at the dead man, and after a while, he said: "He left the doors open. Clearly he was waiting for somebody to join him, or he would have locked them. That means he has an accomplice. After all, it makes sense. How could Brickell carry out his original plan—set the fire, carry all the gold on deck, unloose the life boat and get away from the ship—all by himself!"

"Where is the accomplice, then?" Zugsmith asked. "What is he doing now?'

Troy had no need of answering.

A cry of alarm came from the deck above the wash of waves and the creaking of the rigging. At first it was one voice. Then others took it up, and while Troy and Zugsmith stood as if frozen someone, probably the helmsman, rapped thunderously on the cabin door.

Captain Paris—Captain Paris!" the voice demanded, "you'd better come on deck quickly, sir, there's fire aboard!"

It proved to be a huge blaze in the forward hold, and after close to a half hour's drastic attempts to control it, the seamen slammed closed the traps and scuttled to the life boat reserved for them upon the galley cabin. Zugsmith, now in command since the captain had not yet regained consciousness, had already had the other boat lowered from the davits, and ordered Troy and others aboard.

When he had seen all crew members safely launched, he himself descended into the boat, and they pulled off from the burning ship. Troy and Alverado had carefully packed the gold coin aboard in the bow, and covered it with a tarpaulin.

Zugsmith and Alverado rowed, while Troy, incapacitated by his shoulder wound, sat in the stern with Emma, who shivered against him, the captain's head cradled in her lap. The second mate Wergeland lay snoring in the bottom of the boat.

"The old man will have him scotched for this," Zugsmith predicted, nodding at the recumbent mate.

"That's my fault," Troy said. "I gave him a knock-out drop."

Zugsmith barely took time from his exertions to stare at Troy, then gave a slight laugh. "I'll tell the captain."

The swells deepened, and a strong wind sprang from the southwest, so that they had to shout to be heard. Soon they were separated from the

boat carrying the crew members, and although Troy thought once he heard a concerted cry of dismay, they caught no further sight of it.

Behind them a tongue of flame shot up the foremost of *The Sutherland* and licked at the spreading canvas, and in a few seconds sail and rigging were ablaze like noonday.

ONCE ASHORE on the lonely stretch of Oregon coast, Troy built a fire in a sheltered spot between two dunes.

"We must be somewhere between Gold Beach and the California line," Zugsmith said. "The nearest house is probably miles off."

"Let's have a drink before we reconnoiter," Troy said, pulling a rescued bottle from his pocket.

As the bottle was being passed around, the captain came to his senses. Zugsmith poured a little of the liquor into his master's mouth. The old man looked up at his first mate with strangely subdued eyes, and then stared out to sea where the ship still burned.

"She's gone," he croaked. "That devil Brickell did it after all!"

"He's dead, sir," Zugsmith said. "We left him on the ship."

"And the money?"

"We've got it right here." The first mate kicked at the bulky tarpaulin lying in the sand.

The captain blinked and licked his lips. "I'm afraid I'm not well," he said. "Take over, Mr. Zugsmith."

"Yes, sir."

"Nobody is taking over now but me," Alverado said abruptly. He stood on the opposite side of the camp fire with a gun leveled at them, and his expression was ugly.

Troy sighed. "I thought I had your gun," he said.

"Guns are my specialty, Mr. Troy. Throw it in the sand."

The gambler did as he was told, and the agent scooped it into his pocket.

"Nobody's going to touch that money," Alverado said.

"Nobody but you?" Troy inquired.

"That's right."

"You must be Brickell!" Zugsmith cried. "And the man Troy killed was only your helper. You had to have someone to help you crack that safe!"

Alverado shook his head slowly.

"I was a fool," the captain spoke up suddenly. "I saw Wharton talking to Alverado the night that Troy came aboard. I woke up at two bells and looked out my window, and they stood at the winch with their heads together. I should have taken heed!"

"I spoke to Wharton only as a fellow passenger," Alverado replied. "I'm acting upon my responsibility to see this money gets safely to the Trans-Cascade Bank."

"And how do you propose to do it?" the captain demanded.

"I trust Troy, so I'll keep him here with me to help guard the money. The rest of you can trek to the nearest town and send the sheriff back."

"O-ho, I can see that!" the captain derided. "You and Troy will be gone once we're over the dunes, and so will the money. Troy is your side-kick, too!"

"No, I don't think so, sir," Zugsmith said. "Troy has nothing to do with it." He spoke with firm assurance.

The second mate Wergeland, asleep during all this while in the sand by the fire, sat up suddenly with a wild cry and seized his head. Alverado shot a glance in his direction, and at that moment Zugsmith leapt forward and grabbed the agent about the knees. The impact sent Alverado staggering backwards, and he fell heavily in the sand. The gun went off, and then Troy was between them, seizing the gun from Alverado's hand and at the same time pulling the Colt from his pocket.

The struggle ceased at once, and Zugsmith fell aside, winded. Emma ran over to him. "Oh, Rury!" she cried. "Did he hit you?"

"No, no, I'm all right," the first mate said. Then realizing how concerned she was, he smiled, and took her hand.

Troy turned to see the captain glaring at the foggy-eyed Wergeland.

"What's the matter with you?" he roared. The old man was fast regaining his spunk.

Wergeland pointed miserably at Troy, and the gambler smiled.

"Why do you keep knock-out drops lying conveniently around your cabin, Mr. Wergeland?" he asked.

"None of your damned business!"

"Could it be that liquor doesn't blot you out enough, that you have to take something stronger—like the drops."

Wergeland's head sank, and he looked guilty of an unmentionable vice.

"You're a real hard-head, Mr. Wergeland," Troy said sympathetically, "and whatever troubles you've got, I feel sorry for them. But you also leave those knock-out drops around so other people can pick them up. People, for instance, like your new friend Zugsmith."

'Me?" Rudy asked, turning from Emma.

"Yes. The night you took me out of the hold, for instance, you dressed my wound, then came back with a bottle of whiskey. The first bottle was doctored with knock-out drops that you stole from Wergeland."

"Why should I do a thing like that?" Zugsmith looked genuinely puzzled.

"Because you knew who I was

—you yourself had shot me after killing Caleb Brown the night before. You were the bearded man, Rollo—at whom I threw the lamp. It was you who brought me aboard to hide my body. But when I revived unexpectedly, you thought you might have further use for me, so you brought me out of the hold, but then wanted to 'put me on ice' by slipping me a knock-out drop.

"You were suprised when you returned and found Emma with me, and had to change your plan on the spur of the moment. You knocked over the first bottle and went out for a second!"

"You're crazy!" Zugsmith cried with convincing indignation. "I myself told the captain you were on board!"

"Not at first you didn't! You just said you did. You opened that first bottle of whiskey at the very moment two bells sounded! And yet just now Captain Paris said he awakened at two bells and saw Alverado and Wharton talking on deck. That can only mean you told the captain I was on board after Emma's coming into the cabin made it impossible to hide the fact—not until you went after the second bottle."

The captain sat forward suddenly and roared. "You mean to say that my first mate is this man Brickell!"

Troy shook his head.

"There is no such person as Brickell. Once I knew Zugsmith had lied and tricked me, everything became clear. Brickell was a name and person Zugsmith invented to fool Caleb, who was his partner in a very lucrative venture —robbing coast-wise vessels. But Caleb was also his rival in love. Emma told me when I first came aboard that she had to choose between marrying two men—one who was vain and self-interested, the other, Zugsmith. Was Caleb Brown the vain one whom you rejected, Emma?"

"Yes, yes he was," Emma whispered, and moved away from Zugsmith upon the sand. The first mate looked at the girl with stricken eyes.

Troy said, turning back to Zugsmith: "You wanted your competition out of the way. You knew Brown's weakness was gambling, and that he always lost. You gave him a satchel full of money to pay a mythical man, Brickell, whose job you were going to do yourself. You knew he'd gamble with some of it, and then you could kill him in front of your gang with justification. But everything went wrong from the time I threw the lamp and singed your beard so badly you had to shave it off.

"You got back to the ship to find Emma had made her choice at the last moment, and was on board to surprise you. That complicated everything. You couldn't kill, steal the money, and fire the ship with Emma watching you. That's why

you brought me up from the hold, I think. I was to be pointed out to Emma as the culprit, and you would escape together with the gold somehow. But you had to change your plan again. Wharton was your assistant, not Alverado's. You arranged that he should put the captain out of operation, so you could give the orders. Then you set him robbing the safe.

"You told him you would bring me back to the cabin and kill me there. That's why I found the cabin door unlocked. But you double-crossed him, and let me kill him."

Troy paused and turned to Emma, who crouched upon the sand, with her hands over her face. When he spoke again his voice was gentler.

"In a way, Emma, I can thank you for Zugsmith's sparing my life. I feel sure he loves you very much, and he couldn't bear to do anything that would make him look mean or vicious in your eyes. Think what a hard tormenting problem that was when he was single-mindedly bent on robbing and killing everybody but you!"

ON THE SECOND night after the arrest of Zugsmith, Troy and Emma sat before a fire in the gambler's room at the Tichnor Hotel in Port Orford. On a taboret in front of him lay a solitaire plan which occasionally Emma helped Troy rearrange.

Finally he sat back with a sigh and said: "I've often wondered why, until Captain Paris spoke upon the beach, I never suspected Rudy, even once. Even when the names Rudy and Rollo are both nicknames for Rudolph!"

"Don't speak of it any more, Jim," Emma said softly, slipping her hand in his.

"But now I think I know what it was," he insisted, picking up a card and studying the face of it. "A card has only one face, and I've often heard it said a man has two. The face he shows the world, and the face he shows the woman he loves. I was so busy studying Rudy's first and second faces that I neglected to see he had a third one as well, as I guess we all do. The face we show to our lone self. And I only saw Rudy's when he knew for certain he'd lost you."

"Please, Jim!" Emma rose and stood stiffly beside him.

"It was the same face he showed when he shot me," Troy said deliberately. "The face of a killer."

But Emma didn't hear Troy's final words.

She was gone.

Which was the way Jim Troy wanted it.

A NEW JIM TROY NOVELET COMING SOON

The Lay-Away Plan

The blonde had too much expensive beauty shop know-how. So someone got killed with a completely wrong kind of hair rinse.

by PAUL KRUGER

WHEN MR. GRIDLEY locked up his little corner grocery store that night he took the two cans of spoiled peaches and the jar of rancid peanut butter home with him. A month ago, he thought

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to himself, he wouldn't have dared to do that. Edie would have protested too violently. Miserly, she'd always called it, eating that rotten old stuff to save a few dollars a month. Rotten, indeed!—when there wasn't a thing in the world the matter with it, except it had stood around on the shelves a little too long.

Well, he didn't have to worry about that any more, Gridley reminded himself happily as he walked briskly around the corner to the apartment he'd moved into just yesterday. Edie wouldn't have a word to say about his supper tonight. Edie, in fact, wouldn't have a word to say about anything ever again.

The stairs were dark and the hallway needed repainting. Gridley climbed carefully and shifted the sack to his left arm as he got out his keys and unlocked the door to the one-room apartment with its small kitchenette. It did, he admitted, seem a trifle cramped here after the bungalow, but he didn't really mind it. The place was more than adequate for a quiet widower with simple tastes, and close to the store, so he saved carfare, too.

The bungalow way out on South Mifflin Road had been one of Edie's wilder extravagances, the kind of thing an infatuated middle-aged man could be hoodwinked into by a scheming younger woman. He was glad to be rid of it, and the mere thought of the check for six thousand dollars which he had deposited just that morning had been sending a series of warm ripples up and down his spine all day.

Money, like most things, Gridley thought, prospered and paid better dividends in dark, warm, tucked-away places.

He hummed a little tune as he took his coat off and warmed his spidery hands over the radiator by the window. Then he went into the kitchenette and set about making his supper.

Little household chores had never really bothered Gridley, and that's why it had been so foolish of him to marry. He hadn't really needed a wife and he couldn't think now why he had ever thought he wanted one. It had been a mistake. A mistake he'd paid for dearly . . .

But eventually rectified, of course.

Gridley smiled knowingly to himself. He didn't really mind thinking about it, as some people might. He didn't feel guilty about it or anything like that. Why should he? He'd brought it off very neatly and cleverly—he'd fooled the police, he'd fooled everybody—and nobody could say he hadn't had plenty of provocation.

His bony face darkened momentarily as he considered the provocation. A lazy, ill-tempered, nagging shrew, that's what she'd been, and very likely an unfaithful

wife, too. Not that he couldn't have put up with all that. But the way she'd spent his money had been enough to drive a man clear out of his mind.

The things she'd demanded and sneaked around behind his back to get—the bungalow and all the expensive furniture for it, the clothes, the trips to the beauty parlor, the movies and cosmetics and weekly carton of cigarets . . .

Gridley felt slightly sick, just remembering it. It had been frightful and it couldn't have gone on. He'd known for a long time that it would have to end. She'd push him too far one day, and when that time came . . .

Gridley opened the box of stale crackers he'd brought home the night before and fetched the carton of milk from its storage box on the window ledge. It was the coat that had finally pushed him too far, he reflected as he reached for the can opener. The new winter coat she'd insisted she had to have, when anybody could see that the one he'd bought her two years ago was just as good as the day it came from the store.

They'd had a terrible row over it one night and he'd absolutely forbidden her to buy it. But she'd defied him, had gone straight down town the next morning and deposited the gas-and-electric-bill money on it, so it would be put aside and held for her. Something they called the lay-away plan.

The lay-away plan, indeed!

But even then, Gridley remembered virtuously, he hadn't lost his head and acted in a fit of passion. In fact, he'd said nothing at all. But he had know that the time had come. And later that evening he'd slipped down to the cellar and broken the lock on the outside cellar door.

That had been step number one in Gridley's own lay-away plan.

Gridley yelped suddenly. The opener had slipped and knicked his thumb. He licked a droplet of blood. Blood didn't bother him, the way it did some people. There wasn't much of it anyway, when you didn't try to pull the knife out.

He finished opening the can of peaches and poured them into a dish. Not one thing wrong with them, outside of a few little flecks of mould. It would have been a pity to throw away a can like that. He carefully picked the mould off and wiped his hands. He opened the jar of peanut butter and smelled it. Why, it wasn't bad at all.

Then he sat down and ate. It was a very good meal, he thought —and fully as nourishing as the expensive stuff Edie used to set before him.

After he'd eaten and cleared away the dishes he went in and sat down in the old lounge chair which was one of the few things he hadn't sold along with the bungalow. After all, a man who didn't go out

much—and Gridley's going out was limited to a weekly game of euchre with a couple of old friends at the bar and grille down the street—liked to be comfortable in his own home.

He leaned his head back and started to go over a few figures in his mind—mathematical figures, that is. But just then there was a rap at the door. Gridley straightened up and frowned. He couldn't imagine who'd be calling on him, for he never encouraged company.

He went to the door and opened it. The tall lean blonde standing there was no one he'd ever seen before. He sized her up rapidly—middle-aged, overpainted, brassy-looking.

"Yes?" he said unencouragingly.

"Mr. Gridley?" She had a cheerfully raucous voice.

"Yes."

"I'm Mrs. Akers, hon—Alma Akers. Guess you don't know me, hon, but I'm sort of an old friend of your late wife."

"I see," said Gridley.

"And being I was in the neighborhood, hon, just thought I'd stop by to offer my sympathy for your tragedy."

Gridley hated women who called you "hon." Edie had been one of them. Hon this—hon that—until Gridley could gladly have stuck a knife in her back—which he finally had.

As for this Alma whatever, he'd never heard of her, and there wasn't anything Gridley needed less than sympathy for his tragedy. For ten cents he'd shut the door in her face.

He never got the chance. Before Gridley realized what was happening the blonde had pushed past him and was in the room, looming taller than Gridley himself.

"Don't mind if I sit down a minute and get warm, do you, hon? Darned near froze my toes walking over from the busline."

She could freeze her toes any old time, as far as he was concerned, Gridley thought sulkily. But there wasn't much he could do about it now. So he took it with as much patience as he could summon and asked her to sit down. She loosened the collar of the cheap cloth coat she was wearing and made herself comfortable in Gridley's lounge chair.

Gridley sat on the edge of the day bed, his face grave as befitted a widower receiving condolences, his spidery hands dangling uneasily between his bony knees.

"I don't think I ever heard Edie speak of you, Mrs.—uh—Mrs.—"

"Akers," she supplied promptly. "Mrs. Akers, hon. No, Edie probably never mentioned me. But we weren't personal friends exactly. We knew each other more in a business way."

Gridley stiffened, scenting danger. So that was it. Somebody with

an old bill Edie had run up somewhere, going to try to gouge it out of him. Well, he'd see about that. He'd—

But the blonde was rattling on in her cheerfully raucous voice. ". . . a real shock, hon. I can't tell you how it took me when I read about it in the paper. And they never caught him neither, did they?"

Gridley roused himself. "No," he said gravely. "They never caught him."

"Well, I know just how you must have felt, hon, believe me."

Silly woman, Gridley thought distastefully. She didn't have the least idea how he'd felt.

"Comin' home and finding her like that. But I guess in a way you was lucky at that, wasn't you, hon?"

Gridley frowned and raised one eyebrow. "Lucky?"

The blonde smiled apologetically. Despite the coarseness of her face, with its heavy make-up, she had a broad, cheerful, quite friendly smile.

"Well, guess that ain't no word to use about a man what's lost his wife in a tragedy. But you know what I mean, hon. When they can't catch the person what done it, sometimes they get to suspecting it was the husband."

Gridley smiled wanly. "Oh, they suspected me, all right," he admitted. "But after all, they couldn't get around the fact that I'd been playing cards with friends all evening."

"That's what I mean, hon. You was just sort of lucky all the way around. I mean—what if she hadn't happened to be washing her hair when that guy snuck up on her with the knife? Why, they couldn't have been sure just how long she'd been dead if it hadn't been for her hair still being wet and all. They might have tried to say she'd been dead for three hours and you'd done it yourself before you left for your card game."

Gridley smiled inside, but this time refrained from letting the smile reach his face. He put his hands on his kneecaps, however, and nodded complacently. It didn't bother him to talk about it any more than it bothered him to think about it.

After all, it was little enough credit you got for a first-class job when the job was murder. And he rather enjoyed having someone point out the very things that had made it such a first-class job. Like the wet hair . . .

Actually, the wet hair had been his master-stroke, the really inspired part of his plan, you might say. Because, of course, the only reason it had been still wet by the time the police arrived was that he'd very carefully packed crushed ice into it before he left for the tavern.

"Yes," he said modestly. "I guess if you want to look at it like

that, Mrs. Akers, there was several things made it lucky for me. If my friend hadn't happened to come home with me—well, I guess they could have tried to say I had—well, you know, arranged everything. Wet her hair and all that, so it would look like she hadn't been dead more than an hour or so. But Ben—my friend—well, he was right there with me when I found her and he saw I didn't do a thing, didn't even go near her."

He rocked a little, still nursing his kneecaps. It hadn't been easy to buy those three beers for old Ben—that stingy old coot who hadn't bought a beer for Gridley in the twenty-three years they'd been playing euchre together. But he'd wanted Ben to be a bit woozy when they walked into the kitchen and found Edie sprawled there by the sink with the knife in her back. Because, of course, there'd been one little thing he had to do.

He went on, warming to it. "And that open window near the sink was a factor, too, the police said. They said when the intruder crawled out that way and left it open, a lot of cold air was blowing in on her and it cooled her body faster, and that's why she was a little colder than you might have expected."

Which was where the three beers had paid off, Gridley added to himself. Because old Ben had never noticed a thing—never realized he'd shoved that window up a little while old Ben was calling the police. The old fool had sworn, when the police asked him, that it had been open when they first walked in. Fuzzy old fool—but Mr. Gridley had counted on that.

He leaned back and crossed his bony legs. "Yes sir, guess I was lucky at that," he concluded contentedly.

The blonde chuckled appreciatively. "You sure was, hon, but you was smart, too. I gotta give you that. Say what you want, hon, not many guys could have thought it all up as good as you did."

Gridley uncrossed his legs and sat a little straighter again. He looked at Mrs. Akers very narrowly. She looked back at him and smiled. She smiled quite broadly. And then she leaned forward and waggled a playful forefinger at him.

"C'mon now, hon—tell old Alm. How'd you manage it? About wetting her hair, I mean. You must have sloshed some water on it without that old barfly ever noticing."

Gridley did not feel alarmed. She might suspect the truth, but she couldn't prove a thing. He did feel annoyed, however, that she should think he'd resorted to anything as crude as wetting Edie's hair hair after he reached home. After all, the crushed ice was the cleverest part of it. He looked at her sulkily, feeling a return of his original distaste for her.

She cocked her head to one side and eyed him archly. "Won't tell, huh? Well, don't matter, hon. I was wise to you all along, of course. But I says to myself right away, now don't be in no hurry, Alm. Way I figured it you'd sell the house—maybe sell the business, too, on account of wanting to go away somewheres else to forget your tragedy."

The blonde loosened the rest of the buttons of her coat and made herself more comfortable by throwing the collar back off her shoulders. Then she leaned forward a little. She still looked quite cheerful and friendly, but there was an unmistakable air of business about her now.

"Six thousand you got for the house, hon? That's what I heard. Well, hon, I don't wanna be too hard on you or anything like that, but—"

Gridley suddenly stood up. He felt curiously shaky all at once, and he didn't really know why.

"Now see here, Mrs. Akers," he said sternly. "I don't think I understand. You can sit here and talk all this silly talk if you want to. But you couldn't prove a thing."

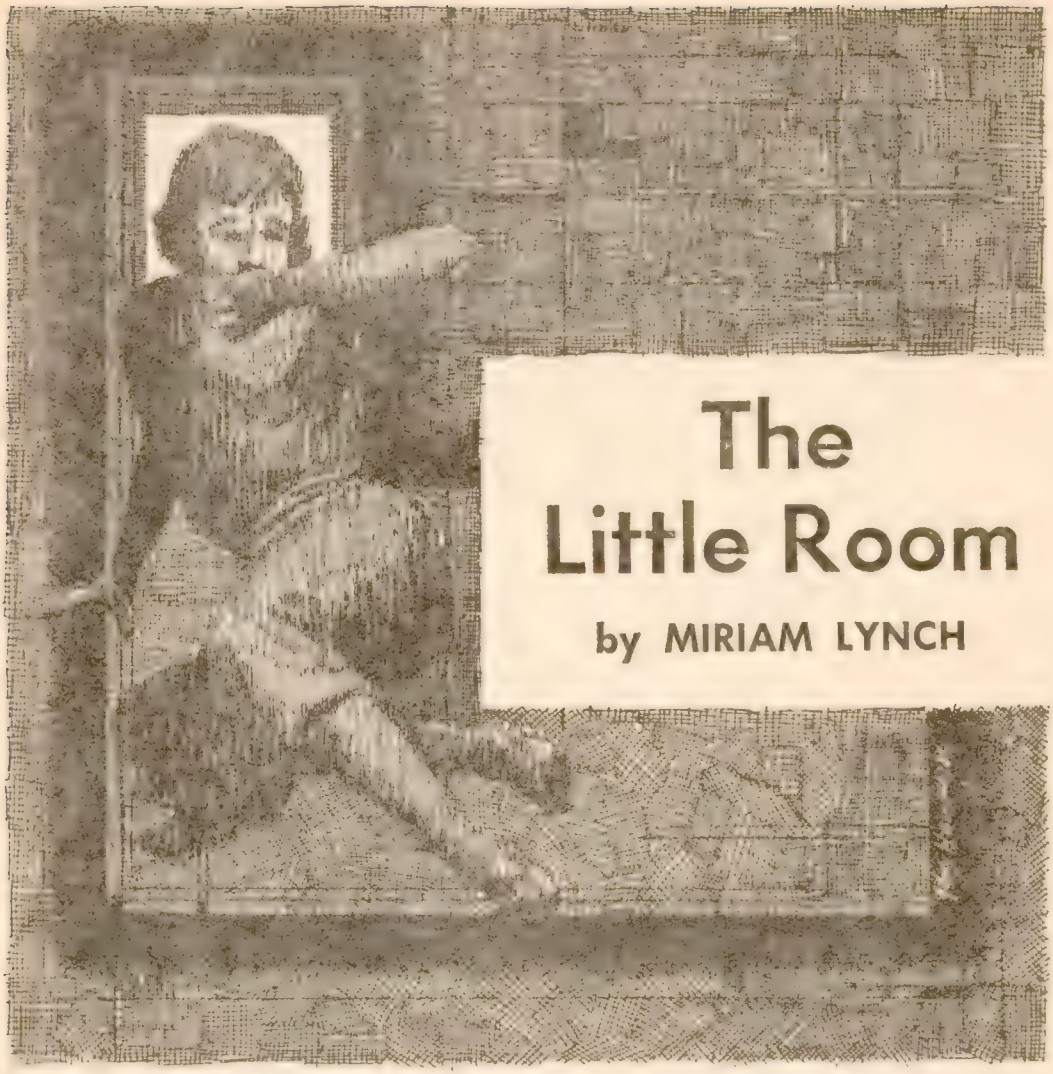
"Why, hon," The blonde's voice was aggrieved. "I maybe don't know just how you done it and all. But I do know she wasn't washing her hair, and I guess if the police ever caught onto that, they'd see the whole thing was just fixed up to fool 'em about the time."

Gridley felt positively dizzy. He knew the hair-washing was most important and he had gone to a great deal of trouble to make it convincing. Filling the basin in the sink, pouring in the liquid shampoo soap, laying out the towels and bobby pins, even plucking a couple of strands of her hair to float around in the basin of water—all this, of course, before he left for the tavern. He'd thought of everything. He *knew* he'd thought of everything.

"I don't see—" he began, trying to make his voice very stern again.

The blonde suddenly threw up her hands. "Oh, my stars, hon, I guess I did forget to tell you about my business. Well, you see, I run a little beauty shop over on the other side of town, and I done Edie's hair for her the afternoon of that very day she was killed. It's right down in my appointment book, hon—shampoo and set for Edith Gridley, November thirteenth.

"And naturally even the police are gonna know no woman's crazy enough to wash her hair twice in one day, hon. Why, it would simply ruin the natural oils and all that. Now about the money, hon . . ."



The Little Room

by MIRIAM LYNCH

Tenny was a very dangerous kind of baby-sitter. But sometimes—a murder plan can boomerang in the making.

TENNY HAD ONE bad moment just before the Hammonds left for the evening. She was sitting in the living room, in the chair nearest the archway, rubbing her palms up and down the satiny surface of its arms. Mr. Hammond's voice started as an upstairs door closed, grew louder with the sound of his footsteps along the hall and down the stairs.

"I don't mind telling you I'm

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not for it," Mr. Hammond was saying. "I don't like the idea of leaving the kids with a girl we've never laid eyes on before."

Mrs. Hammond's pair of footfalls on the thick carpeting of the stairs was lighter, more delicate. Her voice was higher and there were sharp notes in it.

"You're a thorough-going worry wart, Phil. I told you Babsie couldn't come. This kid is a pal of hers. Look, don't try to spoil the night for me. I've had a rugged day, since they got out of bed this morning. It wasn't bad enough that Johnny smeared toothpaste all over Linda's face. He had to cut off two of her curls. Playing beauty parlor, they called it."

This was the mother-whine. Tenny recognized it. She'd heard it in the voice of Betty Johnson, nice as she was. She'd heard it in her own mother's voice.

It didn't mean anything much. Not that a mother didn't love her kids or wouldn't almost go crazy if something happened to them. For all her bad temper and slapping around, Mom had screamed and cried when the littlest baby, looking as limp as a plucked dead bird, was pulled out of her arms.

Mrs. Hammond now, she would carry on, too, if something terrible happened to her kids. Tenny smiled. She was feeling good inside again.

She stood up and was waiting at the archway when Mr. Hammond reached it. He was fussing with his dark blue bowtie that looked nice, Tenny thought, with his clean white jacket and dark trousers. She considered him handsome, the tanned face under the crew cut and the broad shoulders and all. But his eyes looked as though he was worried about something.

"You said you were a friend of Babsie's?"

Tenny bobbed her head and the words came glibly because she had practised saying them over and over in her mind.

"I met her in the dime store today. She says she's got this date, a young man she always wanted to go out with. She didn't want to miss out with him, but she promised you. So I said I'd come."

It wasn't completely a lie. She had been in the dime store. She had been lingering over the eye-catching rhinestone jewelry with its shooting splinters of color. There had been two teen-aged girls beside her. One of them had said that—about having a chance to go out with a boy.

"But I promised to baby-sit at the Hammonds'!" she had wailed.

"Parm me." That had been Tenny, touching the girl's arm. "Did you say 'Hammond'? Them that live over on Colonial Avenue? I know 'em. If you wanna, I'll baby sit for you."

It had been as easy as that. Now all she had to do was repeat,

"She told me to tell you she was sorry, but that it would be all right for me to take her place."

Mr. Hammond went on looking at her with that sharp glance which made her squirm a little. He asked, "How old are you?"

She said, "Nineteen," and his eyes seemed surprised and disbelieving.

She looked five or six years younger than that. The limp, sleeveless blouse hung on narrow, sloping shoulders. The cotton skirt, with its printed figures of tropical birds and palm trees, was held to the hipless body by a wide belt. Her hair was cut raggedly but not in the artfully wind-swept effect that was fashionable at the moment. It was chopped off around her ears and was greasy and streaked. Her eyes had the blank, unfocused look of an infant. There was slackness in the lower lip.

The doubt in Philip Hammond's eyes grew. Tenny's hands were behind her back, half-clenched like claws.

Oh, go! She screamed in her mind. *Go! Go! Get out!*

Mrs. Hammond gave Tenny only a fleeting, unrecognizing glance. She was busy settling the stole over her shoulders. Tenny felt a spasm of relief sweeping over her.

She don't remember, she told herself, almost triumphantly. Then the anger came back, full and hot, because she had meant so little to the woman that she had completely forgotten it was Tenny she had sent back to the Home.

"You may turn on the TV if you like." Mrs. Hammond spoke hastily and absent-mindedly in her eagerness to be away. "And feel free to take anything you find in the refrigerator. If the children wake up, you can amuse them some way. We'll be at the country club. But don't call us unless it's an emergency."

They were gone finally. Tenny heard the motor start and then the scrape of tires along the driveway. And then, at last, nothing but the ticking of the tall hall clock.

Still she sat there. She had to give them time. They might come back. Mrs. Hammond might have forgotten something. Tenny was so pleased with her caution that her teeth showed for a moment in a smile of self-congratulation.

She amused herself while she waited by looking around the living room. It was a nice room, big and airy. In the tenement on Baylor Street, she and Mom and Pop and the kids had lived on top of each other. The place had stunk with Pop's beer and the babies' dirty diapers. When the windows were open, it was even worse. Then you got the smell of the sewerage-contaminated river.

Tenny began to remember how it had been at the Jordans'—nice, like this. She remembered everything about it, although she'd lived

there only briefly and three years had gone by. She'd been sent out from the Home to work there.

The old churning motion in her insides, like seasickness, like nausea, came back as she remembered the Jordans' house. As always, she felt almost physically ill when she thought of the day it had all ended. She had been going downstairs. The two women were in the living room. She hadn't tried to listen to what they were saying but she couldn't help hearing.

Mrs. Hammond was talking—talking about her, Tenny. She stopped short when she heard her own name.

"We don't want her here, Betty. We have to think of the children. That's why we break our backs to live in a section like this, so far from town that we have to depend on day help and baby sitters, because we can't get regular maids. But it's worth the sacrifice. Here the kids can have their own playground, supervised, away from the rag and bobtail.'"

Betty Jordan tried to protest. "But Tenny—"

"She takes your two children to the playground," Mrs. Hammond said firmly. "She comes in contact with my Johnny and Linda and the others. They're small, of course. But an association with a girl like that . . . You know the background. The stories were in the newspapers. It's pretty certain that her father was the worst kind of alcoholic, and that her mother died from being beaten up too often. Betty, you have to send her away.

"Darling," she coaxed, "don't think I'm trying to pressure you. I wouldn't for the world. But Hal is up for membership in the club. My Phil is a client of his, and so are so many of the men around here."

So Tenny went back to the Home, where she had first been sent after her mother and father died. Only this time it was different. At sixteen, she was too old to sleep in the dorms with the smaller kids. They gave her a little room of her own. The walls were so close together Tenny could have touched them from either side of her bed. She had begged and begged. The matron hadn't been able to understand it.

"A room of your own, Tenny! You don't realize how lucky you are."

Lucky! Lying there in the narrow bed with the sweat trickling down her sides and the calves of her legs, even in the winter. Having to bite her teeth to keep from screaming out loud in terror. It was the smallness of the room, the feeling that she was penned in like an animal. Even when she managed to get to sleep, nightmares sprang at her and seized her. She awoke shrieking that the walls were closing in on her.

That was when she had decided

she must do something terrible to Mrs. Hammond—something to make her go almost crazy with pain. It was her fault. If it hadn't been for her, Tenny would still be in the Jordans' big house with her own nice big bedroom. Only for Mrs. Hammond.

The hours when Tenny lay sleepless after the nightmares were sweetened by mental pictures of Mrs. Hammond going half out of her mind. Like her own mother, after the youngest baby had died.

After the churning in her stomach stopped, Tenny got up and climbed the stairs. Mrs. Hammond had taken her through the house and shown her where Johnny and Linda slept. Now she went into the little girl's room first.

A night-light burned dimly in one corner. Tenny could see Linda's small form in the youth bed, curled up in kitten-fashion. Across the child's forehead was a fine spray of hair as silky as embroidery floss. At one side of her face, the stubby ends of the missing curls stood out unevenly.

Johnny was sprawled in his bed in the next room with his arms and legs outflung. His cowboy hat and holster were hooked on the bedpost beside him. There were toys all over the place in both rooms—cabinets full of them, chests bulging with them.

It wasn't fair. The words began their familiar refrain in Tenny's brain again. What kind of shuffle was it that had put the Hammond kids in a place like this and her on Baylor Street? Standing here in this cleanliness and comfort, she thought of the dockside tenement and felt sick once more. No curtains there—torn window shades instead. The thin, scabby walls and her mother and father beyond the wall next to her bed.

Her mother's whimpering and crying. The terror and the pleading in her mother's voice and her father's obscene cursing, as loud as though he had been in the same room.

There had finally come a night when Tenny hadn't been able to stand it any longer. She had crawled out of bed and gone into the next room. She could still see her father's face, all mottled and swollen as he reached down for his shoe.

Tenny touched the spot behind her ear where the shoe had hit her.

Mom had died the next day, her body all ugly black bruises, and red welts. Two days later, while the police were getting ready to arrest Pop, he died. They found him sprawled over the kitchen table, with an empty beer bottle on the floor. The can of rat poison that Mom had kept in the pantry was in his pocket.

Tenny's mind sheered away from the way Pop had looked in the cheap pineboard coffin and skipped over the years when she had been in the Home for the first

time. Her thoughts kept coming back to Mrs. Hammond who had forced Mrs. Jordan to send her back there after that little bit of happiness in the first real home she had ever known.

These kids now, Linda and Johnny, weren't to blame for anything. It was their mother who wouldn't let her stay where it was nice, their mother who had yanked her out of a big bedroom and fixed things so she had to sleep in a little room where the walls seemed to close in on her in the darkness.

Tenny felt sorry for what she had to do to the kids when none of it was their fault. But it was the only way she knew to make Mrs. Hammond pay. She was sorry and she wanted, with a sudden urgency, to do something nice for the kids before she sent them away from their mother forever. Something to make them happy.

The nicest thing Tenny could think of was Wonderland, the amusement park where she had gone once on an outing with the other Home children. There was nothing better than that. Nothing better for the nice thing she wanted to do for the Hammond kids. Nor for her own purpose.

She had not thought, except vaguely, exactly what she was going to do to Johnny and Linda. Now into her groping mind rose pictures of the towering outlines of the roller coaster, the surging sea at the edge of the boardwalk, a dozen wild rides with screaming figures whirled and flung about in helpless joy.

What, for what she had to do, could be better than Wonderland?

Tenny went over to Johnny's bed and touched him gently. He was instantly awake. She urged, "Come on, get up. I'm gonna take you some place—some place nice. We're gonna have fun."

Johnny's eyes lost their sleep-glaze. He sat up eagerly. "Where?" he demanded. "Where are we going?"

"Well, to Wonderland, that's where. You know where that is. You must have been there."

"No, I never." His head moved back and forth in emphatic denial. "I never been there even once." The name seemed to captivate him. He made a song of it. "Wonderland, Wonderland, we're going to Wonderland."

Tenny was astounded. Rich people like this, and the amusement park was only eight miles away and they never took their kids there. Anger at the children's deprival spread over her own old, still festering sore.

"They got ice cream and hot dogs and merry-go-rounds." Tenny remembered something and her voice flattened. "Only it costs. You got any money?"

"In my bank." Johnny was already out of bed, unbuttoning his pajamas. "You hand me my clean underwear. I can dress myself."

He was a sturdy little boy with a half-moon of blond hair dipping down across his forehead. His face still glowed rosily from sleep. He reached for his holster.

Tenny put out an arm and pushed him away from it. "No. Don't take that. You won't need it."

She appraised his weight. He would be heavy enough, even without the added burden of the guns. You had to think about things like that, about how it would feel when you lifted him. You had to be smart.

She felt she was smart again when she sent him in to awaken Linda, instructing him to reassure her. "See, your Mom said I could amuse you when you woke up."

Linda got up smiling and docile. Just like an angel, Tenny thought, pleased with the choice of words in her mind. From the rows of dresses in the child's closet, she selected a starched pinafore with stand-up sleeves like an angel's wings and was delighted with her fancy. The little girl's skin, under Tenny's touch as she dressed her, was as soft and sweet as silk.

Johnny was earnest and practical, worrying about whether or not to take a sweater, and about what his mother would say if she came home early and found them gone.

"You don't need no sweater," Tenny snapped, the impatience like a rising fever in her stomach now. "And your Mom will know you're with me. So it's all right. Don't give me no trouble now!"

They seemed reassured, although they clung to her hands, one on each side of her, as they went out into the pale darkness of the summer night.

Tenny's eyes slid around in all directions. She was afraid of neighbors who might see them and stop them and ask questions. But no one was in sight. On this Saturday night in August, most of the houses along Colonial Avenue looked locked up and deserted.

It was four blocks to the bus line. Johnny darted ahead now and then, or walked backward or lagged behind in search of whatever little treasures were to be found on the sidewalks.

The bus came almost as soon as they reached the stop. Tenny pushed the children ahead of her to the last seat which stretched across the whole width of the bus. She wanted to be sure to keep them with her. She would not have been able to bear any snag in her plans now.

This is something, she told herself, looking across Linda and out the window. *Riding around, free as a breeze, not having anyone to tell me what to do.*

She wished it had always been this way. She did not quite understand why she hadn't been sent out of the Home again after she had returned to it from her brief stay at the Jordans'. The matron

had been vague in response to Tenny's questions.

"You're better off with us dear," she had said. "You don't have any problems here. Doctor thinks it's better. Besides, we need you to help take care of the little ones."

She was good with children, she thought proudly. Look at the way these two minded her, waiting until she gave the signal to get off the bus, holding her hand as they walked away from it and into the narrow, crowded street that led to the boardwalk.

This was Wonderland, cheap and noisy but with its own divisions of caste. The better restaurants and rides and gift shops stretched along the waterfront. Behind them, on shabby little side streets were the Beano games, shooting galleries and palmists' stalls, the rooms for rent in downgrade cottages.

The roller coaster was a twist of hills in the false light. It drew Tenny to its entrance, but the crowds around it confused her, thickened her brain. The noise made her head begin to ache suddenly, the stale old tunes grinding from the merry-go-round, music from the juke boxes, the screams and shouting and the cries of the vendors.

They went wandering up and down the boardwalk. Now that she had rejected the roller coaster, she did not know what to do, where to go. The children began to grow restless and complaining. To quiet them, she allowed them to buy hot dogs and ice cream.

Johnny counted out the money laboriously from his little hoard, and when they had finished eating, she led them across the boardwalk to the beach. She would have to do something soon, she knew. She could not go on wandering aimlessly.

At the Home, they would begin to miss her. She was supposed to be in bed by ten o'clock. They might—she did not know for sure—send someone looking for her or report her absence to the police. She would have to do it now, right away.

Johnny's voice was becoming a piping whine. "Aren't we going on anything? You said the merry-go-round. Why can't we go on the merry-go-round?"

"Because you'd get sick, that's why."

The merry-go-round was no good. What good was jouncing up and down and whirling around while a million people stood around watching? The Old Red Mill was no good, either. She realized that. It was dark in there, but somebody else might be in the same boat with them. Anyway, there was only shallow, rusty water under the boat. The ocean was best.

She led the children down to the waterfront. There were steps

leading down to the sand but Tenny stopped at the top of them. The beach was not deserted, as she had expected it to be. There were men and women, half-grown youths and girls, lying on the sand with their bodies making only one shadow.

"We going swimming?" Johnny asked eagerly. "You gonna take us into the water?"

"No, I ain't." Disappointment tasted like poison on Tenny's lips. "We gotta go somewheres else."

She dragged them back again to the boardwalk. Now she could feel their weariness in their tugging hands. "I'll buy you a taffy apple."

But after they had eaten the sticky fruit they began to whine again. "I wanna go home," Johnny whimpered. "Let's go home. I don't feel so good."

And Linda repeated, "I don't feel good. I'm tired."

The candied apple had left patches of dried red syrup around her mouth. There were drippings of chocolate ice cream and mustard on the front of her pinafore. Across her forehead, her hair clung like wet silk and her eyes were glazed with weariness.

"Pretty soon," Tenny promised. "We're just gonna go one more place."

One place! her mind repeated. But what was it? Where was it? Where was she going to find the place to do what she *had* to do?

They started back along the street leading away from the boardwalk, past the narrow alleys where the refuse of half-eaten sandwiches and candy wrappers and empty greasy boxes littered the sidewalks.

And on one of those side streets, she saw it.

It was a place so perfect, she almost laughed aloud. She jerked at the two small hands, forced the children to hurry with her, dragged them along in her ecstasy of triumph.

"There!" she cried, pointing. "That's where we're going. Into the Fun House."

It was a garish building. Not all of the clashing colors of its facade had been dulled by the years. It was three stories in height and on its top was the monstrous figure of a clown which rocked hilariously back and forth and sent out waves of screaming, hysterical laughter.

Tenny stood looking up, smiling in sympathy with the mechanical hilarity. And as she looked up, she saw that there was a little balcony that jutted out from the third story. On opposite sides of the balcony were narrow doors.

As Tenny feasted her eyes on them, a sailor and a girl came out of one door, crossed the balcony and disappeared into another door on the other side.

It was right. It was exactly right, exactly what she had been looking for. This would be the place.

The children didn't want to go in. They hung back and Tenny had to wipe sticky tears from Linda's face and speak sternly to Johnny.

"I gave you a nice bus ride, didn't I?" She glared at them until they shrank back from her. "I let you have ice cream and hot dogs and a taffy apple. I've been good to you, haven't I? Now I want to go in this place and you make a fuss. It ain't fair."

All the old grievances shook her and saddened her. Memory of past unfairnesses, endured with bitter resentment, brought on that sour churning in her stomach again.

The children huddled together, frightened by her outburst. They followed her silently as she went to the booth to buy tickets. While she was there, the sailor and his girl came out. There did not seem to be anyone else around as she herded the children in front of her through the narrow passageway and into the noisy area beyond.

All the fun house attractions were there, the rolling barrel, the trampoline, the maze where you could get confused and lost. Tenny clung tightly to the children's hands, tugged them past the slides and the mirrors with their distorted images.

They wanted to linger but she was almost beside herself with impatience now. She had to get them upstairs to the little balcony before any stray passing customers were attracted by the mechanical clown on the roof.

They climbed a gangplank that dipped and tilted and Linda cried out, "Oh, Johnny, I feel awful sick. Tell her to take us home! I don't like it here."

"Pretty soon," Tenny shouted, over the noise of the rusty machinery. "You won't be here much longer."

They went up a narrow structure, like a ladder. And then they kept climbing, always up, with Tenny stumbling as she pushed and pulled the children with her in her eagerness to reach the top floor. Fever burned in her throat, set her hands to shaking. She could scarcely wait to find the door that would lead out to the balcony.

The children were crying unrestrainedly now, in weariness and fright. Their voices made a wailing sound that was almost lost in the wanton screams of mechanical laughter. There was no one to hear. The street was far below now.

Suddenly Tenny burst out, her voice ragged with hysteria, "Cut it out! Shut up! I have to, don't you see, I have to."

She felt confused, dizzy from the long climb. There was a door at one side of the passageway. Quickly she shoved the children aside and pushed it inward. She took a step forward into a small, empty room. There was nothing in it—nothing at all. There were

merely four low walls and a crude ceiling overhead.

Tenny stepped backward, wanting nothing from this little room, anxious only to be out of it again. She whirled as she heard an unexpected sound behind her. The door had glided shut. She was completely alone in the little room.

With terror like a strong hand around her throat, she reached out for a door handle—for anything that would let her out of the room, and back into the passageway. There was no handle. The narrow partition which had glided into place in the wall's surface was as smooth as the wall itself. Her hands raced over the unbroken surface, seeking a groove or projection that wasn't there. She began to claw and scream.

"Let me out Let me out!"

Her voice was pure terror. As it died away for a moment for lack of breath, Tenny could hear the scurrying of the children's footsteps. Now she was even more terrifyingly alone in the small narrow-walled prison with no hope of escaping. Her screams began again.

Even when they were shrillest she became aware of another sound—a sound so harsh and unnatural it spun her in a vertigo of horror.

Beneath her feet, a grinding noise had begun, and with it the floor started to tilt. The room rocked from side to side, and her arms flailed out wildly as she strove to maintain her balance. She went skidding from one side of the room to the other, pushed by the continuous motion of the floor and her mounting hysteria. The moving walls seemed to be closing in.

It did not last long. The room stopped tilting in a moment or two, and the door glided open mechanically. But Tenny wasn't aware of it. She lay on the floor, still moaning hysterically.

Two adults and the two children were in the little group that came to find her. The woman who had sold her the tickets had a sternly forbidding face, but her arms were plump and comforting as she held Johnny and Linda on either side of her. With them was a policeman who had been breaking a department rule in the saloon next door.

He reached down to Tenny, and her sobs dwindled off into whimpering. Then she began to babble. The words were almost coherent. She talked about another little room—a police cell.

"I don't want to go there," she shuddered. "I don't want to be locked up in a little room."

Then she talked about her mother whom her father had killed. "He did it. I saw him kill her. So I killed him. I put the rat poison in his beer. But I don't want to go in a cell. Please don't make me! *Please*—"

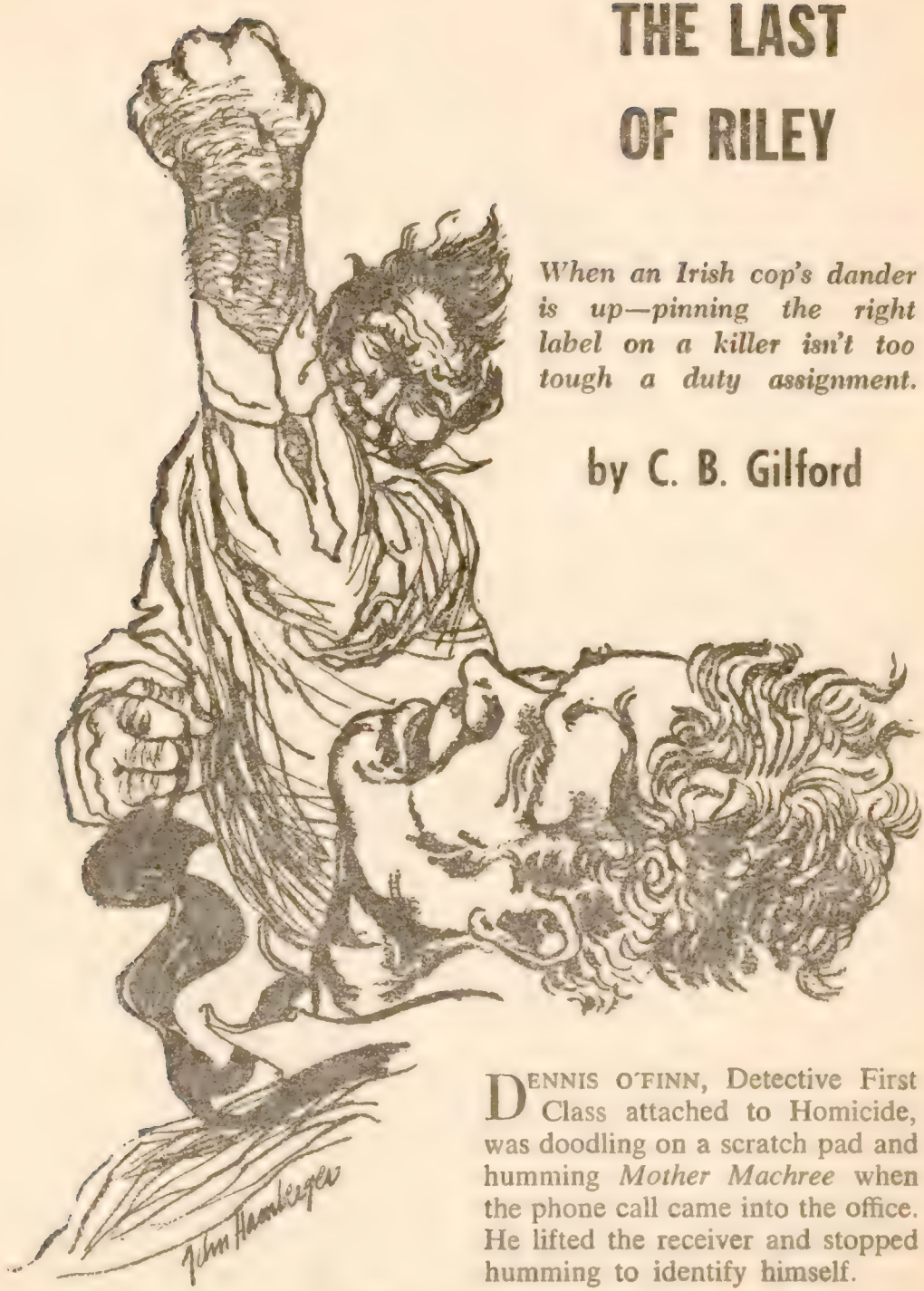
The police officer and the cash-

(Concluded on page 123)

THE LAST OF RILEY

When an Irish cop's dander is up—pinning the right label on a killer isn't too tough a duty assignment.

by C. B. Gilford



DENNIS O'FINN, Detective First Class attached to Homicide, was doodling on a scratch pad and humming *Mother Machree* when the phone call came into the office. He lifted the receiver and stopped humming to identify himself.

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"You're just the man I want to talk to." It was Ginsberg, O'Finn's sometime partner in anti-crime.

"I'm just the man for you," O'Finn said. "I've been sitting here without a blessed thing to do."

"Well, get your big Irish carcass down here to the alley behind Fifteen hundred Delaney Street then. There's a corpse here whose billfold says he's Joseph Riley. Do you know him? You ought to. This is your old neighborhood."

"I may know him if he goes by the name of Black Riley."

"His *nom de plume* I wouldn't know. These Celtic locals won't say much to foreigners like me. That's why I called you."

"Did this Riley meet with foul play?"

"By the looks of things I'd say he didn't die from natural causes. But I'm only a Detective Second Class. This case needs a brain like you, O'Finn."

"Then I'll consent to drop by," O'Finn said.

He got a car from the garage and drove. He knew the exact block on Delaney Street. It wasn't far, and in broad daylight, at three in the afternoon, he didn't have to siren his way. And when he approached the spot, he could tell it easily from the crowd of curious onlookers.

When he got out of the car they quickly made way for him. And well they might. Though in his forties, O'Finn was still an impressive figure of a man. He was wide of shoulder, thick of chest, and passably narrow at waist and hip, all in accord with persistent activity at the gym and the stern, unspoiled regimen of a bachelor. His hair, once red but now gray and curly maned, topped a face that commanded instant respect. Even in plainclothes, O'Finn could hardly be mistaken for other than what he was—a magnificent specimen of an Irish cop.

And besides, they knew him. "Hello there, Dennis," familiar voices hailed him as he passed. He nodded, but didn't stop to chat.

What he came upon eventually was the small, slight form of Ginsberg. Ginsberg smiled in evident relief and pointed down. There at his feet was a sizeable heap of dead humanity with an ugly stiffness about it.

O'Finn squatted on his heels for a closer look. The corpse was indeed Black Riley. The sobriquet was a matter of hair coloring. Riley had a wild, bushy black top on him, and a beard that no razor had ever completely succeeded in vanquishing.

He was lying now with that black top of his leaning against a brick wall and with the pallor of death beneath the stubble on his cheeks. He'd been a man of approximately O'Finn's age and size, about two hundred pounds. A man in short, well able to take

care of himself in back alleys like this one.

"Hasn't been confirmed yet," Ginsberg said, "but I'd guess that he got it from hitting the back of his head against this wall."

"A fight?" O'Finn wondered.

"How else? You know how his kind liked to brawl." Ginsberg pointed to the dead man's left jaw. There was a nice bruise there, already a blue-gray color, and easily visible under the lack of a shave. "Wouldn't you say, Dennis, that he got whacked on the button, then fell back and hit his head?"

"Seems so," O'Finn admitted. "That would be manslaughter, I suppose."

Ginsberg wasn't inclined to be so prejudiced or charitable. "Or it could be murder," he said.

The sirens roared in then. Two vehicles arrived almost simultaneously. A police ambulance and a cruiser with men from the crime lab. O'Finn left Ginsberg to tell them what to do, and turned his attention to the crowd of spectators.

"Well now, who can tell us what happened here?" he began.

He was bombarded with answers. It took him several minutes to sort it all out, to stop everybody from talking at the same time, and to properly separate fact from opinion. As he'd already guessed —and it complicated the situation—Black Riley had not been a popular man.

Riley had been a construction foreman by trade, and, as far as anyone knew, had been currently employed on the new supermarket job a mile uptown. Which made it odd that he should have been wandering around loose on this Monday afternoon. But Mary Donovan had a quick answer for that.

The quickest, that is, to get in ahead of the others. For it was obvious—to all except O'Finn himself—that Mary Donovan had a great yearning to say a few words to him. She was a pretty, fair-skinned, brunette girl with a fine figure. Much too young for O'Finn, but never one to admit it.

"I saw Mr. Riley right after noon," Mary said. "He asked me where my brother Danny was. Danny was one of them, you see, that walked off the job."

Well, it all started to pour out then. O'Finn usually wrote things down in his notebook, and he filled a page or two this time. But he soon gave it up, and just stood and listened instead.

Many of the men of Delaney Street were laborers, and for the sake of convenience liked to work together on the same job. Last week they'd been on the supermarket job, and Black Riley had bossed them. And it was last week that little Aloysius Rogan had gotten hurt.

Aloysius himself was there to explain it. He was a grinning,

monkey-faced little man, hobbling on a pair of crutches. "Fell off the scaffolding, I did, O'Finn, and sprained my ankle something terrible. You can get the doctor's word for that. He taped up my ankle and told me not to go back to work for three weeks."

"And what did Black Riley have to do with the accident?" O'Finn asked.

"The scoundrel didn't believe I was really hurt. He said I was lazy, and would rather be drawing unemployment compensation than working for honest wages. Claimed I'd walked off the job purposely just to make him look bad in front of the boss."

Well, one thing had led to another, it seemed. Some of the others had walked off the job too. It had been a kind of sympathy strike. They hadn't liked working for Black Riley anyway. So they'd stayed off, creating more and more embarrassment for Riley, driving the man to distraction. Finally, on this Monday at lunch time, with none of his gang showing up for work, Riley had come roaring back to Delaney Street for revenge. And found his doom instead.

Riley's corpse had long since been photographed and carted when O'Finn thought he had the straight of it from his many and voluble informers. Still standing in the midst of the crowd, he shouted them all to silence.

"All right," he said to them, "it's clear enough that Riley came to Delaney Street this afternoon spoiling for a fight, and it seems he got it. But as the Law looks at it, this fight went a little too far. Riley's dead. And someone's responsible. Now would that man like to do the honorable thing, and step up and admit his guilt?"

A quiet followed the question. Then Johnny Calhoun, a strapping big youngster with a face full of freckles and a pugnacious nose, made a quiet answer.

"I wouldn't mind claiming the credit if I'd been the man who did it," he said. "It was good riddance!"

"Don't talk that way of the dead." A feminine voice from the middle of the crowd said with pious argumentativeness.

"All right then, I won't slander him. But I won't miss him neither."

Pretty Mary Donovan hadn't allowed herself to be elbowed away from proximity to O'Finn. "Need it have been a fight?" she asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "Maybe he just stumbled and fell."

"In broad daylight?" O'Finn said.

"Well, he was very possibly blind drunk. Riley was a great drinking man."

"I smelled no liquor on the corpse," O'Finn argued. "I repeat now. Isn't the man who could lick Black Riley man enough to step up and admit it?"

Little Aloysius Rogan, grinning maliciously, echoed O'Finn's challenge. "Yes, let him step up," he cried. "I'd like to shake his hand."

And the crowd laughed. There were maybe forty people there. O'Finn, who was taller than all but a few of the men, could look over their heads and count them.

"All right," he shouted again. "We can settle on the fact that Riley's murderer is a black coward. But surely, with all the windows looking down on this alley, someone must have seen what happened here."

It was a try from which O'Finn hadn't expected much result. And he was correct. They were all silent except for the single growl from the rear, "Do you think we're spies and informers, Mr. O'Finn?"

Still it made O'Finn mad. I expect you to uphold the law of the land," he bellowed back, "and to give the proper assistance to the officers of the law. Now if I don't start getting more cooperation here, I'll call the paddy wagon for the lot of you."

But it was no use. O'Finn knew it before he started. These Irish of Delaney Street were a clannish and stubborn bunch. Maybe there'd been a witness or two and maybe there hadn't. But these people had a tradition against carrying tales to the police, and though he himself was Erin to the core, he might as well have been one of the Black and Tans.

So he stalked off in defeat finally, leaving Riley's murderer still a free man, and undoubtedly somewhere in that crowd.

"Oh, you're a great one," Ginsberg told him back at headquarters. "With the killer and probably witnesses too, standing right under your nose, you walk away empty-handed."

O'Finn's temper had by no means cooled. Ginsberg, only half his partner's size, stayed a good distance away from him and close to the door.

"Well, what did you expect me to do?" the big man growled. "Work a miracle?"

"You're a detective, O'Finn. One who detects. Which means using your head. And instead you lost it completely."

"I'll get them down here," O'Finn muttered. "Everybody in that block, one by one. And I'll give 'em all the third degree."

"The Captain will like that."

"All right, you're the genius. Suppose you tell me exactly what to do."

"Well, there's the Donovan girl, for instance."

"What about her? She didn't slug Riley."

"Of course she didn't, you dope. But she might know who did. She has her eye on you, O'Finn. Now that would be one way you could use your head. Or your face any-

way. You're so handsome, Dennis my lad!"

Ginsberg made a quick exit from the room as O'Finn came to his feet with a bellow of rage.

The next morning, which was Saturday, O'Finn drove back to Delaney Street with a plan. He'd go about this in proper police fashion. Legwork, that's what it would take—questions and answers.

The moppets of Delaney Street crowded around his car when he pulled up at the curb. He had a moment of temptation then. One of these kids might have the answer for him, and a visit to the candy store might loosen some of their little tongues. But he resisted the temptation to try to take advantage of them, and merely distributed the coins in his pocket instead.

He had a mental list of suspects, the few men of Delaney Street who might just be big enough to have floored Black Riley. He'd tackle them one by one. There were just three.

The first was the freckle-faced young giant, Johnny Calhoun. He found Johnny up in his mother's second story flat, having a leisurely Saturday breakfast.

"Johnny Calhoun," he began frankly. "I want an account of your whereabouts yesterday between noon and two-thirty. You weren't on the job, so where were you?"

Johnny had a fine story ready, and his mother was there to witness it. Johnny was a lazy boy, Mrs. Calhoun said—a glutton for sleep. She swore that from before noon till the noise and excitement started, her son had been stretched out on the sagging sofa.

"Don't I know it for sure?" she finished, her broad face stern. "Didn't I have to sweep and dust around him, and him dead to the world all that time?"

Now a mother testifying on behalf of her own flesh and blood is not the most impartial kind of witness, but O'Finn had to be satisfied. For the time being, at least.

The next man he sought out was Terry Shaughnessy, a married but childless man of thirty, a first-floor dweller, and the ower of wide shoulders and a pair of big fists that well might have killing power in them. But Shaughnessy had a woman behind him too, his wife Katy. She was a plain girl a few years younger than himself.

When O'Finn had put his question, his suspect had a question of his own. "Are you asking, O'Finn, if between noon and two-thirty, was I maybe fighting Black Riley down in the alley? Well, I was not. And I'll tell you why. The Shaughnessys were all that time having a private battle of their own, right here where were standing now."

"We were indeed," Katy Shaughnessy affirmed. "I was giving him a piece of my mind on

the subject of walking off the job for the sake of Aloysius Rogan. Why we should starve on account of that blatherskite is beyond me."

O'Finn left as quickly as he could, just in time to avoid being caught in the middle of the second round of the Shaughnessy versus Shaughnessy contest. For the moment, he'd have to accept Terry's alibi as honest truth.

His third call—and the one he made with the greatest reluctance—was to the Donovan domicile. Pretty Mary Donovan had a brother Danny, a handsome, black-haired lad in his middle twenties, of good size, and with a known reputation for handy fists.

Danny was home, and as O'Finn had dreaded, Mary too. She was in fine fettle this morning, her figure ripe and luscious even in her plain house dress, her face bright and fresh, and her eyes lighting up when she saw who their visitor was.

"Now why is it you suspect me, Mr. O'Finn?" Danny wanted to know.

"Because you're one of the few men in this neighborhood capable of knocking Black Riley off his pins."

"Well, thank you for the compliment. But I didn't do it."

"Where were you then between noon and two-thirty yesterday?"

Danny exchanged glances with his sister, and for a moment neither of them spoke. Then Mary finally turned her pretty blue eyes full force upon O'Finn.

"As I told you yesterday, Mr. O'Finn," she began sweetly, "I saw Mr. Riley just after noon, and he said he was looking for Danny. Well, I was afraid of the very thing that happened—that someone would get into a fight with Mr. Riley. And I didn't want it to be Danny. So I went myself and fetched my brother out of Dugan's pool hall. It couldn't have been more than twelve-fifteen when I did that, and Riley was alive then. I brought Danny up here and kept him here till I was sure Riley was gone."

"Till two-thirty you kept him here?" O'Finn asked skeptically.

Mary Donovan fluttered her black lashes prettily at O'Finn. "Sure I did," she said. "I stayed off my own job and I got Danny his lunch. We stayed here till the noise and commotion started, whatever time that was."

It didn't sound completely credible to O'Finn, and mentally he listed Danny as his prime suspect. That there had been bad blood between him and Riley had been made evident by his sister's fear of a fight developing. Mary could be protecting her brother. For that matter she could even have witnessed the fight. But O'Finn could think of no way of politely voicing his disbelief, especially to so pretty and bold a girl as Mary Donovan. He'd have to check this as-

pect of the case from some other direction.

Still, accomplice, liar, or whatever she was, Mary showed great disappointment at O'Finn's departure. She put out her hand to him as he went, and he had to take it for a moment. Her hand felt small and warm, yet strong and capable too. O'Finn had his moment of weakness. Mary Donovan was a fine girl, and he hoped her brother hadn't slugged Riley. But standing here holding her hand wasn't going to find him the man who had.

"I may be back with more questions," he said quickly, drawing away.

"Oh, please do come back, Mr. O'Finn," Mary said.

It was high time to get out then. And O'Finn did . . .

Sunday night was an off-duty time for O'Finn, but the Riley case had weighed heavily on his mind. So it was over the latter's violent objections that O'Finn took Ginsburg with him to Black Riley's wake.

In an unmarked car, they pulled up in front of the house where Riley had lived with an assortment of his kin. They sat there for a moment, Ginsberg glum and morose, O'Finn rehearsing his plan of battle.

"I still don't see why I have to go in there," Ginsberg grumbled.

"To pick up the pieces," O'Finn told him.

"Pieces of what?"

"Of me maybe," O'Finn said. "Though I'm hoping otherwise."

"Is there going to be a fight?"

"There is."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Business, strictly. This is the way I figure it, you see. First, I'll have you know, I once tangled with the deceased myself. He knocked my block off, fair and square. Therefore the only ones who could possibly have slugged Riley, as I see it, are the ones who can lick me. But I'll have to find out which ones they are."

Ginsberg was horrified. "You mean you're going to disturb the peace of this solemn occasion by having a fight with every one of your suspects?"

"That I am. And for your information, my lad, a fight or two at a wake will be no great novelty."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"Just stand back out of the way, and be ready with the cuffs for the man who floors me."

They went inside then, Ginsberg still unwilling but propelled along by O'Finn's strong hand. O'Finn had timed their entrance correctly. The prayers had been concluded, but the mourners remained, and more than one of them had had a few nips already.

Riley in his coffin was, of course, still the center of attention—although as the wake progressed and grew more boisterous he would

become more the excuse rather than the reason for this gathering. O'Finn crossed the room and knelt briefly before the bier. Riley's face on its silken pillow, pale and still in need of a shave, ignored him.

His duty done, O'Finn rose and made a quick check. No men to dishonor the dead by a posthumous snub, his suspects were all there, Donovan, Calhoun, Shaughnessy. Mary Donovan was not in evidence. In the kitchen making sandwiches or brewing coffee for the ladies perhaps.

Aloysius Rogan, the little rooster whose misfortune had started all this, hobbled grotesquely around on his crutches. In fact, from the looks of things, all of Delaney Street had come to pay last respects.

O'Finn found Ginsberg a shadowy, out-of-the-way corner, and installed him there. Then he himself commenced to mingle, letting his presence be known to all. And very quickly he, rather than the corpse, became the focus of attention.

"O'Finn," Aloysius Rogan began, mockery in his tone, "have you found the blackguard yet who did poor Riley in?"

O'Finn smiled what he thought was a cunning smile. "No," he said, "but I have a theory."

A hush fell over the crowded room. So that all could hear Rogan when he asked his next question. "Are you going to tell us who it is? The man's a hypocrite for sure, if he's in this room, come praying at poor Riley's wake."

" 'Tis no man," O'Finn answered.

"No man?" Rogan's eyes bugged out. "A woman then?"

"Not a woman neither."

Rogan blinked. "Sure you're not one, O'Finn, to believe in leprechauns and the wee folk?"

They were all listening carefully now. It was time for O'Finn to set the trap.

"You misunderstand me, Aloysius," he answered slowly. "Now listen to my reasoning. Black Riley —I speaking physically now—was the best man in this room. No man standing here could have lived in that alley with him long enough to have given him a clout that would send him into a brick wall and be the end of him. So Riley wasn't the victim of a single blow by a single man in a fair fight. Some of you ganged up on him, that's what happened."

They were all stunned by the accusation, as O'Finn had expected they would be. Then their anger grew.

"You mean," Terry Shaughnessy muttered, "that any single one of us would have been afraid to tackle Riley alone?'

"That's what I mean exactly. The men who killed Riley were a crowd of cowardly jackals bringing down a lion."

O'Finn saw Shaughnessy coming in plenty of time. And he saw his cocked right fist. But it wasn't his purpose to duck. He had to let Shaughnessy get that first blow in unimpeded, to guage the weight and force of it.

So he let it land on the side of his jaw. It was a solid blow and good one. O'Finn saw stars for a brief second, and reeled backward. But the density of the crowd kept him from falling.

By the time he came up again, he had made his decision about Shaughnessy. His fist hadn't killed Riley. But he was still to be dealt with. O'Finn was forty, but what with daily work in the police gym, he was in the pink of condition. As the crowd bounced him back toward Shaughnessy, his own fists went into action. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . and Shaughnessy was down on one knee.

O'Finn spoke quickly. He didn't want a grudge fight-to-the-finish with Shaughnessy or anybody else. "You, Johnny Calhoun," he said, "with what other man here could you have licked Old Riley?"

Calhoun was a slightly tougher customer than his predecessor. The freckled giant charged in without waiting for a second invitation. His fist exploded on O'Finn's left cheek, a little higher than Shaughnessy's target. O'Finn crumpled sideways, grabbed onto a couple of people to keep his feet, shook his head to clear it. Then he came back fast.

Calhoun was young and strong enough, but he wasn't clever. O'Finn feinted him, then caught him with three quick jabs in the area of the chin. Calhoun was out of the struggle for a moment, and O'Finn didn't want him to go on fighting. Because Calhoun wasn't his man. Calhoun just didn't have a killing power in his fist.

But the thing managed itself nicely. O'Finn found himself looking straight into the blue eyes of Danny Donovan. "Well, Danny?" he challenged. He had no more breath to spare than that, and he was glad he had no more than three of these men to fight.

Danny's blow was like the kick of a healthy mule. O'Finn had a split second to think the thought, "He's my boy . . . poor Mary . . ." Then the blackness descended.

But it didn't last. When he started seeing again, O'Finn knew somehow that he hadn't been out for more than two or three seconds. And to kill Riley would have meant putting him out for the count of ten. Reluctantly, resignedly, O'Finn stumbled back toward his third opponent.

But this part of it came unexpectedly easy too. "Danny Donovan!" a shrill female voice—Mary's, of course—screamed. Startled and distracted, Danny glanced toward his sister who was strug-

gling through the crowd toward him.

O'Finn had no choice. The only way to get it over with quickly and mercifully was when Danny had his head turned. One nicely placed shot did it, and Danny was on the floor.

There was a pause for confusion then while Mary plowed through the rest of the crowd, knelt beside her brother and cradled his head in her arms. Then, apparently seeing that he wasn't dead, she turned her face toward his attacker, her eyes blazing.

"Dennis O'Finn," she said with wrath, "you're a beast and a bully. I saw how you hit poor Danny."

O'Finn hesitated. He could explain. He hated to think of this fine girl's having so poor an opinion of him. But he caught himself just in time. Maybe it was a bit safer in the long run to let things stay just as they were. A contrite and apologizing Mary Donovan might be too much for even O'Finn's stout bachelor's resistance.

He forced his thoughts back to the business he'd come for. Running a hand over his bruised mouth and gazing around at the crowd, he perceived swiftly that their present attitude toward him coincided with Mary Donovan's. And for all of that, he hadn't found Black Riley's murderer yet.

"You're a fine man, O'Finn!" It was Aloysius Rogan now, spitting fire. "Telling us we're all cowards, then hitting a man who isn't defending himself!"

Somehow, perhaps instinctively, O'Finn felt that he had to portray his villain's role straight through to the end. "But I'm no murderer," he said. "I'm no part of a street gang that will attack and beat up a lone man. And I've fought the best of you now, and I can repeat. Black Riley is the best man in this room." His voice bristled with contempt.

Aloysius Rogan's ugly little face was deep crimson now. "Riley was a dirty dog!" he screamed. "He trapped me there in the alley. Me, on crutches, all alone. And he came at me. You're of the same stripe, O'Finn."

O'Finn saw the crutch coming at him, but it was harder to duck than a fist. He tried to, and failed. But as he went out, he had at least a comforting thought. "That crutch is the only thing that could have staggered Black Riley against a brick wall."

GINSBURG was beside O'Finn's infirmary bed, telling his prone partner how Aloysius Rogan was safely stowed in the lock-up. "I had to do it all alone," Ginsberg finished. "You were out cold. I guess that makes me the brawn part of our team."

O'Finn glared.

Ginsberg leaned down and patted his partner's bandage. "And you're the brains, of course. Who

could deny that you used your head?"

O'Finn came up on one elbow, and the smaller man backed to a safe distance.

"By the way, Dennis," he said, "there's a Mary Donovan outside, panting to see you. She says she understands everything now."

O'Finn gestured with his bruised right fist. "You let her in here and you'll regret it," he threatened. "Get that straight right now!"

Ginsberg sighed sadly. "I apologize, O'Finn," he said.

"For what?"

"For accusing you of having a head."

THE LITTLE ROOM by Miriam Lynch

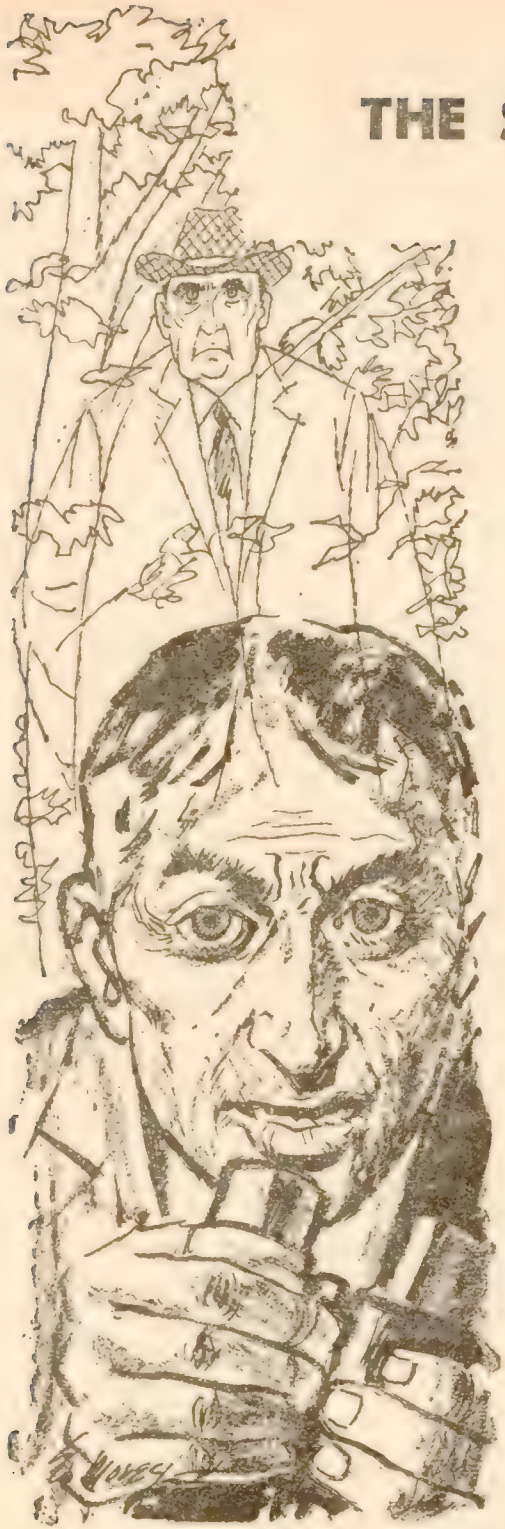
(Concluded from page 111)

ıer looked at each other and shook their heads. Johnny asked timidly, "Can we go home now? I'd like to see my mother."

His sister protested in a thin whisper, "She said it was going to be fun. And it wasn't fun at all. I guess she isn't very smart, is she?"

The officer's eyes looked old and weary and sad.

"No," he said, bending over and lifting Tenny to her feet, "I guess not."



THE SECOND PURSUIT

by JOHN GLOAG

Bird watching is a gentle hobby, quite remote from homicide. But there are birds which . . . cast a gallows-shadow.

TIMOTHY SHAIRE fainted at the breakfast table on Thursday morning. He was a fussy, irritably nervous little man—a bachelor of fifty. He lived in comfortable lodgings near the top of Richmond Hill and earned a good salary as manager of the statistical research department of a big industrial firm.

Both his temperament and his work had made him a dry, precise individual; but there was something faintly rebellious tucked away in his character. It consisted primarily of a yearning for nature and excitement, and it found expression in two hobbies: bird watching, and, in a purely literary

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sense, the study of crime and detection.

When his landlady, Mrs. Amberly, found him sprawled on the floor with his breakfast untasted and the morning paper clutched in his hand, she said: "Influenza can take a severer form when you're ill to begin with. He hasn't been himself since Monday. The fever must have weakened his heart."

That was true: Shaire had not been himself since Monday morning. He had been very jumpy, and more nervous than usual, and his never hearty appetite had failed altogether. He'd looked and felt harassed and ill.

The trouble began early on Monday morning. It was a fine day, and as usual Shaire rose at six and was out in Richmond Park a half hour later, equipped with binoculars and shooting stick for his morning walk to the Migratory Bird Ponds. There he could study innumerable water fowl and make careful notes of what he had seen.

At that hour he had the Park pretty much to himself, and as he invariably resented the presence of other people he felt irritated when he saw a burly man in a dirty raincoat, standing by the shore of the upper pond. The man was standing very still, gazing at the smooth water.

Shaire walked half way along the path between the ponds, unscrewed the metal disc from the side of his shooting stick, and adjusted it to the thread just above the point, so that it kept the stick from boring too far into the ground. He sat down and focussed his binoculars on the island in the upper pond. In doing so he swept the glasses in a wide arc, and the man standing by the pond came momentarily into his field of vision.

Shaire had a swift impression of a dark, heavy-jowled face with overhanging black eyebrows; then he settled down to watching the island.

He was presently aware that the man had moved and experienced a sudden, impossible-to-resist impulse to lower his glasses and look towards him. The pool-gazer was walking in his direction, very slowly and with a pronounced stoop. His big shoulders and long arms gave him an almost ape-like appearance.

Shaire swallowed rapidly. He experienced a chilling sensation of alarm, because his second hobby helped him to recall, at that precise moment, the description of a dangerous criminal who had escaped recently from Broadmoor and had been traced to southwest London. This criminal, Lothrop Dane, had been convicted of two murders so atrocious that his sanity had been questioned. He had, Shaire remembered the exact words, "a swarthy face with heavy, overhanging eyebrows,' 'and "he walked habitually with a sham-

bling gait." Dane's eyes were deep set, of a cold, pale blue, and although he was only twenty-seven, he was quite bald.

Shaire hesitated, then raised his binoculars and took a close-up view. As the man came into focus, he took off his cloth cap and wiped his forehead, and with a convulsive shudder, Shaire saw that he had a completely bald head.

The man continued to stroll around the Pond towards Shaire. But Shaire didn't wait. He put his binoculars in their case, slung it round his neck, pulled out his shooting stick, and set off briskly for Richmond Gate, up the slope towards Sidmouth Wood.

As he left the trees that shaded the north-west corner of the upper Pond, he glanced back and saw that the man was following him. Shaire realized that if he remained on the open path, he would soon be hopelessly outdistanced, especially if the man started to run after him. If he turned to the left and took the path by the little Leg of Mutton Pond, he would have bracken on both sides of him, into which he could crawl and conceal himself, and several little gullies where he could probably play a successful game of hide-and-seek with the monster until—until—well, until help came.

But precisely where help could come from at so early an hour, before the park keepers were thawed out, he couldn't guess. Perhaps some of the Park woodsmen might be about, for they went to work early.

He decided to make for the path through Sidmouth Wood, called the Driftway, where there was plenty of shelter and men might be working. He hurried on, glancing back now and then. The man was still following him.

By the time he reached Sidmouth Wood, he was almost running, his pursuer matching his pace, though not gaining on him. After he passed through the gate into the wood, Shaire took to his heels and raced along the Driftway, then hid in a clump of rhododendrons, and waited. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was five minutes to seven.

He waited patiently in the damp and dripping rhododendron thicket, heard the pleasing chimes of the Richmond Infimary clock strike seven, and then heard someone coming along the path very stealthily. He shrank back into the rhododendrons. Through a gap in the leafy screen he saw a big man in a raincoat pass by, and he was no longer walking with a stealthy shamble—he was striding out.

His extensive reading in the literature of crime and detection immediately suggested a course of action to Shaire. This, he realized, was where he doubled back on his tracks. But it was nearly ten minutes after seven before he could bring himself to leave his shelter.

When he did, he trod on a dry branch which cracked like a pistol shot.

Shaire glanced about him like a trapped animal, and decided not to risk the path, but to scramble back through the thicket, over the fence behind it, and into the bracken of the coarsely wooded southern part of Sidmouth Plantation, forbidden to the public.

He had never ventured into any prohibited area before, and having torn his trousers in two places on barbed wire, he regretted that he had been compelled to break regulations. But it was, he told himself, a matter of life or death. The thought made his teeth chatter. He crawled into tall bracken, the big fronds rising to six feet in height, and crept along on his hands and knees, his shooting stick trailing from one hand.

Unfortunately, he had taken the wrong direction, quite an easy thing to do when crawling through bracken, and suddenly, when the bracken thinned, he stopped, and caught his breath. In a clearing, immediately in front of him, a large man, dressed in a dirty raincoat, was lying on his stomach, peering down a tunnel though the bracken in the direction of the Driftway.

Shaire had doubled round, and come up behind his pursuer. It was an obvious deduction. The situaion was clear. But knowing exactly what sort of danger he was in did not supply Shaire with any theories as to how he should get out of it. At any moment this great brute, Lothrop Dane, twice a murderer, and condemned as criminally insane, might turn about, and add to his number of victims.

The word *counter* came into Shaire's mind; counter something —counter irritant? No, no—he had it: *counter attack*. After all, he had a weapon. A shooting stick, with the disc screwed on to the end just above the point, is a long-handled axe.

Shaire grasped the hooped handle of his shooting stick. If he jumped up and brought it down quickly, without warning, crash, on to that tweed-covered bald and brutal head, he could stun this criminal madman, and then run to the Richmond Gate and give the alarm.

It took him some time to screw up his courage. Then he rose quickly, and before the man could turn, brought down the shooting stick with all his strength. He heard what he had read of so many times in books, a sickening thud. The man who had been supporting himself on his elbows, collapsed, and fell on his face. His legs twitched convulsively, and then he was still.

Shaire trembled so violently that he dropped the shooting stick. Feeling sick and giddy, he picked it up, staggered through the bracken, climbed over the fence into the

Driftway, and went directly home.

It was only when he reached his lodging that he remembered he had not given the alarm. He had a bath and changed his clothes, drank two cups of black coffee, but couldn't eat anything. That was when Mrs. Amberly began to think he was far from well.

It would have been easy to have dropped in at the Police Station on the way to his train, but Shaire shrank from the publicity. To have his private life and his actions dragged through the press, to be accused perhaps of manslaughter. No! he decided. If he had put that sinister murderer out of business, it was a good thing. If he had merely stunned him, then somebody else would find him, and he needn't appear at all.

But it wasn't so easy to forget that somewhere in the bracken, in the open part of Sidmouth Wood, a little to the south of the Driftway, the dead body of Lothrop Dane, a murderous madman, might be lying. He began to wonder when the body would be found, and on Thursday morning, he opened his paper and found that the news had broken.

Lothrop Dane had been recaptured in Kingston-on-Thames. There was a long account of how he had been recognised, and then there was another significant news item.

"Late last night," ran the second report, "in the Sidmouth Plantation of Richmond Park, the body of Inspector James Feveral was discovered. Death had been caused by a blunt instrument. The skull was fractured, and the body had been lying in the bracken in the enclosed part of the Plantation, apparently for some days.

"Inspector Feveral was engaged in tracing the whereabouts of Lothrop Dane, and believed that the escaped prisoner would attempt to contact his twin brother, Marcus Dane, whom he closely resembled, and who lived in a house that adjoined the wall of Richmond Park. Inspector Feveral, who also resembled the prisoner in build, had been at some trouble to assume the appearance of this twin brother, and had already traced Lothrop Dane to the vicinity of Richmond . . ."

At that point in the account, Timothy Shaire fainted.

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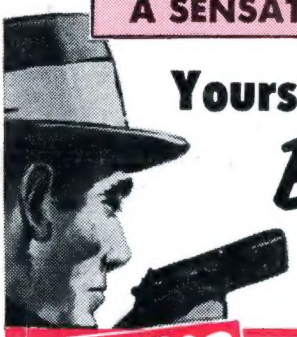

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